VIII
Tearmoon Empire
Nozomu Mochitsuki
Illustrator: Gilse

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Characters

Tearmoon Empire

Granddaughter and Grandmother

Miabel

Mia's future granddaughter who leapt backward through time. Goes by "Bel."

Mia

Protagonist. The sole princess of the empire. Ex-selfish brat. Actually a coward. A revolution leads to her execution, but she somehow leaps back through time and wakes up a twelve-year-old again. She successfully avoids a repeat encounter with the guillotine, but then Bel shows up...

The Four Dukes' Families

Ruby

The daughter of the Duke of Redmoon. A gallant lady with a wardrobe to match.

Citrina

The only daughter of the House of Yellowmoon. Bel's first friend.

Esmeralda

The eldest daughter of the House of Greenmoon. Self-proclaimed best friend of Mia.

Sapphias

The eldest son of the House of Bluemoon. Got into the student council thanks to Mia.

Ludwig

Young, motivated government official. Sharp tongue. Ardently believes in Mia and is trying to make her Empress.

Anne

Mia's maid. Born into a poor family of merchants. Mia's loyal subject.

Archnemesis

Dion

The strongest knight in the Empire. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's executioner.

※ ——— Future Timeline Relationship

※ ····· Previous Timeline Relationship

Revolution

Archnemesis

Outcount Rudolvon's Family

Cyril

Tiona's younger brother.
Super smart.

Tiona

The eldest daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. Looks up to Mia. In the previous timeline, she led the revolutionary army.

Assistance

Archnemesis

Kingdom of Sunkland

Keithwood

Prince Sion's attendant.
A cynic. But a competent one.

Sion

Crown Prince. All-round genius. In the previous timeline he was Mia's archnemesis, aided Tiona and eventually became known as the "Penal King." In the present he accepts that Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire.

[Wind Crows] Sunkland's intelligence service.

[White Crows] A team within the Wind Crows formed for a certain project.

Support

Holy Principality of Belluga

Support

Rafina

The Duke's daughter. Saint-Noel Academy's student council president and the school's de facto decision maker. In the previous timeline, she supported Sion and Tiona from behind the scenes. Her smile can be lethal.

[Saint-Noel Academy]

A super elite school attended by all the highborn children of neighboring nations.

Kingdom of Remno

Abel

Second Prince. In the previous timeline, he was known to be an extraordinary playboy. Now, as a result of meeting Mia, he works to diligently improve his swordsmanship instead.

[Forkroad & Co.]

Chloe

The only heir of Marco Forkroad, whose company spans multiple kingdoms. She is Mia's classmate and book buddy.

Chaos Serpents

A group of chaosmongers trying to wreak havoc upon the world. They are deeply hostile toward the Holy Principality of Belluga and the Central Orthodox Church. Traces of their clandestine misdeeds can be found throughout history, but the details are shrouded in mystery.

Tearmoon Empire

Nina
Esmeralda's maid.

Balthazar
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Gilbert
A fellow disciple of Ludwig's cohort.

Musta
Head chef of the imperial court of the Tearmoon Empire.

Elise
Anne's younger sister and the second daughter of the Littstein family. Mia's court author.

Liora
Tiona's maid. Hails from the Lulu tribe who live in the forest. An expert archer.

Vanos
Dion's adjutant and former vice-captain of a hundred-man squad in Tearmoon's imperial army. A giant of a man.

Matthias
Mia's father. Tearmoon's emperor. Dotes on his daughter.

Adelaide
Mia's mother. Deceased.

Galv
An old wiseman and master to Ludwig.

Outcount Rudolvon
Father to Tiona and Cyril.

Equestrian Kingdom

Malong
Mia's senior. Club leader of Saint-Noel Academy's Horsemanship Club.

Kuolan
A Moonhare. Mia's favorite horse.

Kingdom of Sunkland

Monica
A member of the White Crows. Infiltrated the Kingdom Remno as an attendant to Abel.

Graham
A member of the White Crows. He is Monica's superior.

Merchants

Marco
Chloe's father. Head of Forkroad & Co.

Shalloak
A powerful merchant who sells all sorts of goods to kingdoms throughout the continent.

Kingdom of Remno

Lynsha
The daughter of a fallen noble family in Remno.

Lambert
Lynsha's older brother.

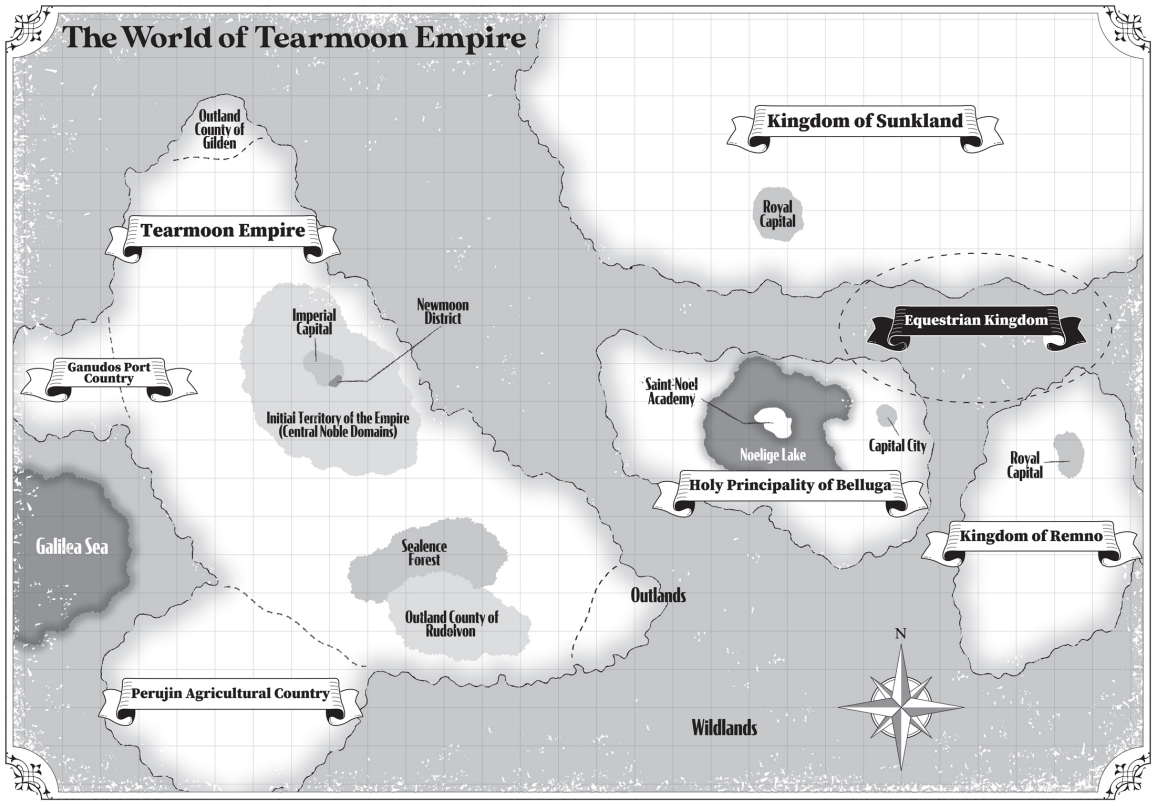
Perujin Agricultural Country

Rania
The third princess of Perujin. Mia's schoolmate.

Arshia
The second princess of Perujin. Rania's older sister.

Story

Mia, the reviled selfish princess of the fallen Tearmoon Empire, is executed, only to wake up a twelve-year-old again after somehow leaping backward through time. With this second chance at life she resolves to fix the ills that plague the Empire... so she doesn't end up at the guillotine again. With the help of her previous life's memories and a healthy dose of overly-generous interpretation of her actions by those around her, she successfully averts a revolution, only to be told by her time-leaping granddaughter, Bel, that in the future Mia's entire lineage will end in ruin and she herself will be assassinated. In order to avert this grisly fate, it seems necessary for her to become Tearmoon's first empress...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Outland County of Gilden
Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Equestrian Kingdom
Ganudos Port Country
Saint Noel Academy
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Noelige Lake
Capital City
Royal Capital
Holy Principality of Belluga
Galilea Sea
Kingdom of Remno
Sealence Forest
Outlands
Outland County of Rudolvon
N
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Wildlands

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Part 4: To the Moon-Led Morrow II

Chapter 1: A Request from King Yuhal

"Huh? You want me to join you in the Thanksharvest Dance?"

Mia frowned, caught off guard by the sudden proposition. She'd been lounging in the guestroom of Perujin Agricultural Country's renowned cake-shaped castle, and figured that given her exploits last night—successfully navigating King Yuhal's dinner party and triumphing over the wealthy merchant Shalloak—she'd solved all her problems for the time being and earned some time off. This assumption was proven wrong when Princess Rania showed up and immediately asked, "Princess Mia, would you be willing to join me in the Thanksharvest Dance?"

The abruptness of the request and the graveness of her expression puzzled Mia.

"But isn't that something only Perujin princesses are allowed to do?"

As far as Mia knew, the dance was supposed to be a divine ritual performed by Perujin princesses to offer thanks to the heavens on behalf of their people.

"Normally, yes, but this time we have something called the Visitant's Dance that's performed to welcome eminent guests to our country."

"Hmm..."

Mia crossed her arms in thought. *I suppose as the princess of a powerful neighboring empire, I'd classify as an eminent guest...*

She did fit the bill.

"But it's a participatory thing, right? I don't know the dance, so I'm not sure if I'll be able to keep up."

"You'll be fine. The dance steps are the ones you helped me with that one time."

"Oh, now that you mention it, I do remember that."

Knowing that dancing was Mia's (only) forte, Rania had once asked her for help. Every year, Rania had to perform the Thanksharvest Dance during the festival, but her sense of rhythm was *spectacularly* bad. The process of teaching her, Mia remembered, had been particularly grueling.

“Besides, you managed to get here earlier than planned, so you can take your time learning the steps.”

There was still a week until the day of the performance, so she certainly wouldn’t lack practice time.

“Hm... Well, in that case, I suppose it’s fine...”

Since dancing was her (again, only) forte, she wasn’t particularly worried about learning the choreography. Tatiana had also been prodding her to get more exercise.

I’ll probably end up eating a lot through this festival, so I’ll need to work it off somehow. This dance practice might actually be just the thing I need.

“Oh, by the way, Rania,” she said as another thought came to her. “Can I bring Bel? I won’t ask for her to be included during the real thing, but could she at least practice with us?”

Bel was no slouch either when it came to the amount of face-stuffing she’d done since arriving in Perujin. Prescriptive exercise was necessary lest she end up like Shalloak.

“I don’t see why not. Bel’s...a relative of yours, I believe?”

“Yes, she’s my gr— Erm, sister.”

Rania, who took her verbal stumble for a hesitant but honest reply, gave her the kind of sympathetic nod of understanding usually reserved for leaving awkward familial implications unsaid.

“Understood. Since she’s a member of the imperial family, it might even be okay for her to participate in the actual performance. It’s said that in the old days, the Visitant’s Dance used to be performed by ten people or so. We’ll have her practice with us. Then, if she’s okay with it...she can join us in the real thing.”

“Huh? Are you talking about me, Miss Mia?” asked Bel, sitting up from her hammock with a start.

The hammock, fastened to two poles in the center of the room, swayed with her motion.

“Eeek!”

She promptly tumbled off the wobbling fabric.

The previous night, after returning from Shalloak’s treatment room, Mia had found Bel snoozing comfortably in the gently rocking embrace of a

hammock.

“No more, Miss Mia... I can’t eat anymore...”

The pleased grin on her face along with her mumbled comment made clear what kind of dream she was having. The hem of her pajamas was upturned, revealing her belly button.

“I swear, this girl...” Mia shook her head. “She really needs to remember she’s technically the princess of a great empire. This is not at all presentable...”

Mia, for the record, actually had pretty good sleeping posture. Her personal sleep-vice was the fact that every so often, she’d simply take leave of her bed at night. This happened most frequently after exposure to ghost stories, after which she’d be discovered in Anne’s bed in the morning.

She pulled Bel’s pajamas back over her tummy and mumbled, “I’ll never figure out who this girl took after...” As she did, she realized that said tummy was, in fact, quite round!

“I’ve never eaten...anything so tasty... Ehe hee... I can keep eating this forever...”

As if on cue, Bel chimed in with her sleep-mumbling. Mia suddenly felt like she was looking into a mirror. This girl was, like herself, a victim of the same dreadfully mellifluous curse—the curse of infinite appetite when faced with delicious food—that would be an endless blight on their future health. Fortunately, Mia now knew how to fight against its corrupting influence. The answer was exercise! And maintaining a routine lifestyle!

“I need to get Bel to exercise more...”

Bel’s rotund belly had filled Mia with a new sense of purpose, which was why Rania’s proposal was nothing short of a godsend.

“Bel,” Mia said, “for every piece of delicious food you eat, you need to work it off through exercise. You’re coming with me to dance practice.”

Bel hopped to her feet and straightened her back. “Understood, Grand—Miss Mia! If you want me to practice, then that’s what I’ll do.”

She was a good girl.

“Oh, but we only have a few days left before the performance, so I’ll have to cut down on my study time with Professor Ludwig...”

A cheeky little rascal, but still a good girl.

“No, I don’t think you should do that. It’s for your own good.”

Bel groaned. “Oooh, Miss Mia... You’re always so mean...”

She promptly launched into a misty-eyed, whimpering fit. Mia regarded the performative weeping and sighed.

The sheer audacity of this girl, I swear... She’s a natural-born seductress. If it were father, she’d have him wrapped around her finger. It’s scary to imagine what she’ll be like in the future... thought Mia, not quite sure whether she was supposed to feel proud or concerned.

Chapter 2: Princess Mia...Throws Herself into Dancing!

After agreeing to Rania's request, Mia promptly began practicing the Thanksharvest Dance. Perujin dances involved holding a paddle-like instrument—wooden clappers called "naruko"—in each hand and rhythmically rattling them as part of the choreography. This was no problem for Mia, who ultimately managed to emulate the routine she was shown almost perfectly. There was an entrancing beauty to her fluid, graceful movements that made it seem as if she'd been performing this dance all her life. While she was undoubtedly a good dancer to begin with, the sheer mastery she displayed was the result of hard work—a lot of it.

What convinced her to work so hard, you ask? Well...

"We'll have you do a simplified version of the dance," said Rania, "since the full version is pretty complicated."

This act of thoughtfulness was turned down by Mia, who replied, "My, you don't need to worry about that. I'm fine doing the full version."

She didn't *want* to say that, but behind her was Bel, who'd looked up at her with wide, expectant eyes and said, "Oh, I can't wait to see Grand—Miss Mia dance!"

The earnest admiration of her granddaughter stroked her ego just enough to push the words out of her mouth before her brain had a chance to step in. She even managed to add, "Oho ho, then prepare to be amazed, because my dancing will be breathtaking!"

Her brain was *really* out for lunch.

Having openly declared that she was going to wow her audience, failure was no longer an option. Lacking the nerve to wing it on the stage, she succumbed to her inner chicken and decided to play it safe. So, she practiced and practiced. Then, she practiced some more. All the while, she was tormented by nightly nightmares of badly blundering on stage.

Nevertheless, she put in the time. After all, Mia believed in winning through sheer numbers. Sheer number of hours, that is, be it studying or practicing. As a result, she managed to develop the muscle memory necessary to master the choreography, after which she proceeded to use this newfound competence to instruct Bel.

"Hold on, Bel. That part doesn't go like that. It's more like a *whoomph* kind of thing, and then you go *whoosh* with the spin, and then just *shooo* to a stop."

Her incomprehensibly virtuosic instruction was, however, interrupted by a visitor.

"Hello, Princess Mia. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"My, Chloe. I had no idea you were here too." The sight of her dear book buddy brought a smile to Mia's lips. She'd missed her. "I must say," she added with a curious tilt of her head, "I didn't expect you to show up with Tatiana. It's not every day I see the two of you together."

Tatiana, who'd been taking care of Shalloak the past few days, also appeared. She should have still been with him, in fact, so what was she doing here?

"Mr. Cornrogue said he wanted to speak with father, so..." said Chloe, worry evident in her expression as she looked at the ground.

"It'll be okay," Mia said with a gentle smile that quickly turned smug. "I already had a *word* with him. Right, Tatiana?"

"Yes. Ever since speaking with Her Highness, Master Shalloak has changed. He's become a completely different person."

Mia's conversation with Shalloak did indeed mark the day his intractable disposition vanished, leaving behind a far meeker individual. Part of the reason was undoubtedly his commitment to resting his ailing body, but she figured she deserved most of the credit.

Oho ho, and it's all thanks to me. I broke that man for his own good. He should be glad I was willing to play the villain for him.

"Not to mention... Tatiana's been whipping up medicines for him to take."

Mia grinned deviously.

Tatiana's no slouch herself, is she? Not only is she forcing Shalloak to shape up and get healthier, she's even fixing his personality. She did say she was giving him medicines to thin his blood, after all. Smoothing a man by

smoothing his blood... What a cunning method. The girl knows what she's doing!

People whose blood was thick and viscous were touchy and hot-tempered. This was common sense to Mia, who was a firm believer in the (pseudo)science of blood-based temperance.

"That's why there's no need to worry. He probably won't do anything unpleasant," she said, figuring he probably wanted to apologize.

Little did she know, the conversation would go much, much further than a simple apology.

"Lord almighty, Shalloak. Look at you. This must've been quite the ordeal," said a shocked Marco as he walked into Shalloak Cornrogue's treatment room.

"Ah, Marco. You came. I'd have liked to greet the head of Forkroad & Co. with a tad more dignity, but..."

Shalloak grimaced, the expression emphasizing the slightly haggard lines on his face. At the same time, he seemed more at peace, as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"All the business deals I was planning to do here have also gone up in smoke. I've truly hit rock-bottom."

"You seem rather cheerful for a man at rock-bottom."

"Well, you know... A brush with death changes a man. I've been doing a lot of thinking lately." He met Marco's gaze. "I've wronged you, Marco. If you can find it in yourself to forgive me, then I beg you to accept my apology."

Marco widened his eyes, astonished by both the apology and its sincerity. *It truly is as if he's a different man... So much so that it's frankly uncanny.*

He smiled with resignation and shrugged. "It was all just business. There's no need for you to apologize. I am curious, though... What brought about the sudden change of heart? Was it Her Highness?"

"I...suppose it was. You could say she opened my eyes. To the kind of death that lay at the end of a life lived for nothing but money, and the regret I'd feel if I did that." Shalloak lowered his gaze. "It...scared me, and I panicked. Can you imagine that? A grown man, panicking because of what a young girl told him. But here we are. I still feel the panic, and it compels

me to *do* something...”

“I see...” Marco widened his eyes again, astonished anew by the confession. The Shalloak he knew was famous for his aggressive, profit-focused approach to business. That Shalloak was nowhere to be seen, and it was all the doing of Mia Luna Tearmoon...

No wonder Chloe changed so much... No, it’s not just her. I have as well...

Ever since he’d heard about Mia’s Bread-Cake Declaration and how it—in his mind, at least—would lay the foundation for a grand vision of ridding the whole continent of famine, the idea stayed with him. Before he knew it, he’d started thinking of ways for him to contribute to the project. Wasn’t this, he would wonder, his chance to truly make use of his merchanting know-how?

“Hm? Is something the matter?”

“Oh, no, no. I was just thinking...” Marco’s expression grew pensive. “In that case, Shalloak, I have a rather timely proposal for you. Now, I haven’t heard anything from Her Highness, so this is entirely speculation on my part, but I believe she’s going to...”

And so, Perujin’s Thanksharvest Festival began in earnest, setting the stage for a myriad of intercrossing motives and ambitions to come to fruition.

Chapter 3: Dance of Dawn

Perujin's Thanksharvest Festival was a grand event that began in the early evening and lasted through the night. In the middle of the capital, Auro Ardea, was the town square, where an offering altar had been built. It was here that the offering of first wheat was performed—a lively ceremony that was ritual and feast all rolled into one. A portion of the year's earliest batch of harvested wheat, which had been put aside for this very purpose, would be placed upon the altar. This signaled the official start of the festival.

With the celebration under way, Mia was...

"Aaah, this tahkoe is such a marvel. I had no idea a spicy tang went so well with mushrooms! I mean, mushrooms are plenty delicious when eaten by themselves, but when you combine them with other ingredients, they really bring out a lot of extra flavor. Such fascinating stuff, mushrooms. There's so much more to know about them."

She took another bite and all but shuddered at the sheer deliciousness. The thin bread wrapping housed a generous bundle of crisp, leafy greens dabbed with a reddish sauce that provided the spicy kick. Complementing them were Mia's favorite food—mushrooms. The softness of the bread contrasted perfectly with the vegetables' crunchy texture, both of which were further enhanced by the chewiness of the mushrooms. The trio of flavors delighted her taste buds.

"Oh, it's *so* good! What a wonder that Perujin had such an excellent harvest. I won't get to enjoy any of this back home, so I'd better eat as much as I can right now. I need to burn their flavor into my memory."

Just as the thought of losing access to Perujin food began to make her consider scheduling yearly trips here, Rania's lady attendant showed up.

"Princess Mia, it's about time, if you please..."

"Hm, then it's our time to shine! Come on, Bel!"

Mia rose boldly to her feet. An aura of confidence radiated from her. Having consumed a great deal of delicious mushroom dishes, she was

raring to go.

The sheer amount of wonderful food I got to enjoy here definitely calls for a proper expression of gratitude. I need to thank the divine power that allowed such delicious mushrooms to be harvested, as well as the people of Perujin for turning them into so many tasty dishes. This dance is the perfect opportunity for me to show my appreciation!

She walked into a building, where she received the clothing she would wear as a visitant. It was an odd set of garments. The top was a single piece of fabric that wrapped around the body and was tightened with a sash, while the bottom resembled trousers with very wide legs. She'd never seen anything like it.

Anne promptly began to help her change into them, only to find the process more confusing than she'd expected.

"Um... I think this part goes like this? Wait... Huh?"

"Take your time, Anne. It's unfamiliar clothing, after all. It's only natural we'd have trouble figuring it out."

"Yes, but still, I'm sorry it's taking so long... I'll go ask someone from Perujin for help."

Anne darted off, soon returning with Rania's attendant in tow. With the additional help, she steadily deciphered the donning process and straightened out Mia's appearance. There was no tension to her movements, nor any of the fretful anxiousness she'd displayed when pressured by a desire to become more like Tatiana. The inferiority complex-laden Anne was gone, replaced by her usual, diligent self using her usual, diligent approach to learning a new skill. Eventually, she took a step back and nodded to herself, clearly satisfied by her handiwork.

"All right, I'm done. You're good to go, milady."

Seeing that Anne had gotten back into her stride, Mia let out a deep breath and replied with a smile, "Thank you, Anne. Off I go."

As the festival ramped up toward its climax, it reached a brief lull—like the calm before a storm—while the princesses stepped backstage to prepare for the dance. The merry chatter of the feasters, the volume amplified by the abundant alcohol present, waned in anticipation of the coming peak. For a short moment, silence fell over the festival.

"Your Majesty..."

Yuhal, who was taking a quiet sip of his drink, turned at the mention of his address.

“Hm? You are...a subject of Princess Mia, I believe?”

“Yes. My name is Ludwig Hewitt. I work at Tearmoon’s Golden Moon Ministry,” said Ludwig as he kneeled. “Forgive my intrusion, but may I be so bold as to ask for a moment of your time?”

His deferential attitude was well warranted. Normally, it would be an act of great impudence for a mere minister like him to speak unprompted to the king.

“Be at ease. It is a night of festivities. Tonight, king and subjects celebrate as one, for we give thanks to the Lord. Before the power of the Lord, we are all but equal mortals. Speak your mind.”

“Thank you. Your Majesty is most generous,” said Ludwig as he respectfully seated himself beside Yuhal. A few seconds later, he continued in a quiet voice. “If it’s possible, Your Majesty, I’d like to know your reason for permitting Her Highness to participate in the Thanksharvest Dance.”

Yuhal didn’t immediately respond. He simply swirled the drink in his cup, seeming neither surprised nor offended by the question. Eventually, he replied in an equally soft voice.

“It was...simply a whim. No reason in particular...”

“Was it to set up a staged debut?” pressed Ludwig, all but overriding the king’s answer.

Yuhal raised an eyebrow at the sharpness of the question before grinning.

“Oho. So you already figured it out. I see that the princess’s chief vassals earn their keep.”

Seeing that his question was received favorably, Ludwig continued to probe.

“I can see how introducing Her Highness to the Perujin people in this manner would leave an impactful impression, but why do so? This is something that will deeply affect the future of both our nations. What moved you to this decision?”

Instead of answering, Yuhal posed a question of his own. “Tell me, Ludwig. Are you aware of what happened at Saint-Noel Academy’s entrance ceremony?”

He was, of course. Word of Mia’s Bread-Cake Declaration had long

reached Ludwig's ears, and he'd already extrapolated the vision it was ostensibly building toward.

"I am, and if I'm to imagine a framework through which that declaration can come to life... It would be a massive border-spanning anti-famine organization that operates throughout the continent."

"Correct. And such an organization would require a base of operations. A location for its headquarters. Furthermore, its operations would require agricultural expertise as well as food provisions that can be quickly transported. It seems to me...that Perujin is in a perfect position to nominate itself for this role."

And that was the full scope of King Yuhal's vision for the future of his country. At the same time...

"Perujin has no intention to place our trust in the empire itself. However, we are willing to trust Princess Mia as an individual and shall spare no effort to help her achieve her grand vision. Having her leave a lasting impression on my people...is my first step in laying the groundwork for this endeavor."

...It was also his answer to himself. As the king of a people who'd built a castle in the shape of a cake, this was the future he felt they deserved. That was why he extended an invitation for Mia to participate in such a momentous event.

"Excuse us, but might we join in on this conversation? The topic greatly interests us as well."

Hearing a new voice, he turned to find the approaching figures of two eminently accomplished merchants—Shalloak Cornrogue and Marco Forkroad.

"Ah, Mr. Cornrogue. Has your health improved?"

"Enough to get me on my feet, and that's good enough. I can hardly afford to be sleeping during such a pivotal time."

Clack! Cla-clack!

The shrill sound of wood hitting wood dampened the noise of the crowd.

"Ah, it's starting. We can save this talk for later. For now, let us show our performers the respect they deserve."

Thus, the princesses began their dance. The performance would prove to be a historic event, referred to by later generations as the dance that brought

Perujin dawn.

Chapter 4: Perujin Dawn —Where the Cake-Shaped Castle Leads—

Clack! Cla-clack!
It sundered the silence.
Clack! Cla-clack!
It shook the night air.
Clack! Clack! Cla-clack!
The dance began.

The fire-lit altar glowed in the square, the flickering light of its wind-blown flames dancing along with the princesses they illuminated.

Arshia and Rania twirled gracefully around the altar like wheat swaying in the autumn breeze, their faces blurred behind a thin, fluttering veil. Their well-practiced motions flowed like silk, drawing fond smiles from the gathered onlookers.

“Remember how Rania’s dancing last year was still a little, you know...? Look how much she’s grown.”

“She really has. I’m so proud of her...”

Audience discourse unfolded with the tone of proud parents watching their growing children perform. Year after year, they gathered here and witnessed the same sight. So familiar were they with the scene of the two sisters dancing round and round the altar that it had become a symbol of the season, offering a sense of comfort and nostalgia through its unchanging nature.

This year, however, things were different.

Clack-clack! Cla-clack! Cla-clack!

An unfamiliar rhythm greeted their ears. Then, as if responding to the unusual cadence, a third set of wooden clappers sounded in the darkness.

Clack! Cla-clack!

Everyone who looked toward the source of the sound was left speechless

by what they saw. Soon, all eyes were fixed on the new figure and her striking attire. Dressed in the clothing of visitants, which was made to resemble the garments worn by travelers from places far to the east, she all but demanded attention. Her long, draping sleeves of sky-blue fabric were adorned with gold thread sewed in the shape of wheat. Circling her waist was a brilliant sash embroidered on which was a sequence of shapes depicting the life of a fruit from sprout to harvest.

What shocked them the *most*, though, was the person wearing the clothes. Her platinum blonde hair left no doubt even from afar. It was the famed princess Mia Luna Tearmoon herself. Behind her stood someone they assumed was her attendant. Or perhaps her relative—the adorable young girl did have the same hair color as her, after all. Slowly, the two of them walked in perfect sync with the rhythm toward the altar.

"Oh, so it's the guests from Tearmoon who'll be doing the Visitant's Dance this time," remarked someone in the crowd, the offhand tone representing the attitude of the crowd at large. They all knew what to expect —at least, they *thought* they did.

Right in front of their unsuspecting eyes, Mia exploded into motion.

As soon as she reached the altar, she switched up her rhythm. The steady andante that represented peace and stillness suddenly transformed into a vigorous allegro with the furious intensity of a burst of lightning. The new rhythm, fast and passionate, radiated unbridled delight.

The Visitant's Dance was rooted in an ancient tradition that existed before the founding of Perujin. Once upon a time, the farmers who lived on this land had been long tormented by the difficulty of tilling its arid soil. Then, a traveler told them of the existence of more fertile lands and led them there. The dance was meant to express the delight, excitement, and gratitude of the people at the time. Its swift tempo and rhythmic intensity were too difficult for Bel, so the routine naturally centered around Mia, whose exceptional dance skills allowed her to perform with panache.

I sure hope we'll have a great harvest next year too. And have lots of delicious mushrooms grow. Oh, and wheat. We need wheat for cake, after all. Fruits too, of course, and please let them be sweet and tasty.

The alignment of her personal desire with the choreographic theme lent an authenticity to her dance, enhancing its artistic expressiveness. She threw her hands up, the motion sudden but graceful, allowing her long,

billowing sleeves to trail them in a slower, flowing arc. Before the sleeves fell, she quickly spun in a half-circle to wrap them around her body, only to come to an abrupt stop before reversing her rotation.

The fluid interplay of kinetic beauty and statuesque stillness was synergistic, allowing the dynamism of the former to accentuate the beauty of her silhouette in the latter. Then, she sundered the calm once again, breaking into her next sequence. Gentle steps and twirls swiftly built to fiery flourishes. She kicked her leg up high. As she brought it back down with a *thump*, her other leg propelled her into a small jump. Landing in a pirouette, she held a pose and sounded her wooden clappers.

Cla-clack!

So passionate, so impeccable was her dance that it left the spectators transfixed, staring with wonder-filled eyes as if they were witnessing something divine. This was not the first time they'd seen the Visitant's Dance. Never, however, had they seen it done with such sincerity, such zeal! Prior guests had all given half-hearted efforts, their simplified routine more a show of participation than a performance. And that had been fine. No one had ever expected otherwise.

But this princess did not choose to settle for *fine*. She matched—in some cases surpassed—the emotion and energy of her Perujin counterparts. Through Mia, the sacred dance was truly brought to life, fully realizing its function as a holy prayer celebrating and giving thanks for the Perujin people's harvest.

Mushrooms, mushrooms, oh delicious, delicious mushrooms. Cakes and fruits and lots of tahkoes. May I have the chance to enjoy it all again with everyone next year!

On and on she danced with the holy(?) prayer in her heart. As she did, Rania approached, dancing with equal vigor. They parted, then neared again, repeating the cycle in concert like a pair of skylarks going about their eponymous game. The sight of their shared smiles evoked a communal memory of a day not long ago...when the two princesses walked up the golden slope hand in hand. They'd walked as one. Now, they danced as one. The Tearmoon princess had paid them the greatest possible degree of homage. So, they returned her enthusiasm in kind.

The crowd went *wild*. The spectacle of the dance, coupled with the joy of a good harvest and further magnified by the stirring memory of that day

at the slope, brought the audience's energy to unprecedented heights. The sheer excitement in the air was entirely incomparable to any other year they could remember.

Eventually, the dance drew to a close. Amidst the unending cheers of the crowd, King Yuhal stepped forward at the perfect time for maximum dramatic effect.

"Now, let us give thanks for the year's harvest. Praise the Lord for this generous gift!" he declared in a booming voice before the altar.

"Praise the Lord!" echoed the crowd.

"And praise Princess Mia as well, for the earnestness and integrity she displayed in dealing with us. She deserves my thanks, and I'd like to give it."

He walked toward Mia, who stood there with a "that was a job well done" look, shoulders still heaving from exertion.

“Please accept my deepest gratitude for your magnificent dance, Princess Mia.”

“Oh, well, you’re very welcome. I’m glad you feel that I did it justice.”

Mia glanced at Bel and nodded with satisfaction at the sight of her admiring gaze.

“On that note,” continued Yuhal, “do you remember the question you posed to me the other day? Would you mind if I delivered my answer right now?”

After receiving Mia’s affirmation, he turned toward his people.

“People of Perujin, I have a request for you: please commit the events of today to memory. The sights, the sounds, the excitement and emotions. Remember them. Keep them close to your heart, alongside the wonder you felt that day at the golden slope.” His voice, though quiet, made its way into every ear. “You have all seen for yourselves. Princess Mia, who stands before you now, is not like the Tearmoon nobles we have come to know. She deals with us in good faith, and she seeks from us not our subordination, but our trust.”

Rumbles of awe and approval rolled through the crowd. For them, whose ears had been calloused by language such as *vassal state* and *lowly serfs*, the word *trust* was a healing salve. A mere word though it was, the fact that it came from the lips of a Tearmoon princess gave it weight. It meant something, because they knew that the one who spoke it had consistently and unerringly demonstrated through her actions that she would stand behind what she said. Trust was a two-way street, and she’d already earned theirs.

“That is why...it is my wish to give it to her. To build this bridge between her and our people. No matter what the nobles of Tearmoon say, our trust shall lie with Princess Mia. She shall never betray us. In return, we shall remain faithful to her as well. Those of you gathered here today, I ask that you swear with me. Regardless of what trials and tribulations we might face in the coming days, we shall never allow our trust in Princess Mia to waver.”

He was answered by thunderous cheers. What had started as a burst of fervor in the town square would soon ripple through the capital like a seismic wave, eventually shaking all of Auro Ardea.

This day would go on to become a momentous one, known as the Day of Perujin's Dawn, serving as a historical crossroads that decided the future fate of Perujin as a whole.

Perujin Agricultural Country, situated to the south of Tearmoon, had long been viewed as a vassal state to the empire. With no serious standing army and a complete lack of military fortifications in their land, it had almost no way of repelling a foreign invasion alone, making it dependent on the empire for defense.

That never changed.

What *did* change was the perception of its people. Never would later generations refer to them as *serfs*. To them, Perujin was a country to be respected, because it was home to the headquarters of the Mianet, a border-spanning network of famine-fighting organizations that supported one another. Despite its significance, however, its date of inception was a matter of much debate among experts. Its formal commencement was technically three years after the Day of Perujin's Dawn when the summer regained its usual heat, but its conception as a system of mutual aid had begun far earlier.

There were those who believed that it was this year—specifically, this very Thanksharvest Festival—that gave birth to the Mianet. And they had good reason to do so, for this occasion was in fact the first time the core members of the Mianet had all gathered in the place that would serve as its future headquarters.

First, there was the official leader of the Mianet, Chloe Forkroad, whose skills subsequently proved indispensable in getting the operation off the ground. Then, there was Marco Forkroad and Shalloak Cornrogue, who gathered and liaised with numerous merchants to establish a robust transportation network that could swiftly move foodstuffs to and fro. Next, Rania Tafrif Perujin, whose steadfast efforts were instrumental in spreading agricultural knowledge throughout the continent and developing systems to ensure crops could be reliably produced and harvested. Finally, the holy angel in white, Tatiana, who pushed for various types of medical reform with a focus on the continent's poorer nations, resulting in improved access to healthcare.

These historical figures had all rallied under the banner of Mia Luna

Tearmoon's Bread-Cake Declaration. Together, the Great Sage of the Empire and her friends fought hard to eradicate plague and famine from the land. And the people of Perujin were behind them every step of the way. The cake-shaped castle, frequented by numerous bringers of peace and prosperity, would eventually become their symbol and home.

All of those, however, are future stories yet to be told.

—Excerpt from *The Chronicles of Saint Princess Mia*, "The Day of Perujin's Dawn"

Chapter 5: That Is the Way Bel Chooses to Live

Mia sighed as her carriage rolled down the road. *I think I might have eaten a tad too much last night...*

Two days after the Thanksharvest Festival, Mia was on her way home. Had she gone to Saint-Noel, it would have been time for the summer holidays by the time she arrived, so she decided to go straight back to Lunatear.

Shalloak and the two Forkroads all claimed to have unfinished business in Perujin, so they chose to extend their stay. Tatiana lingered as well to accompany Shalloak.

I promised Chloe we'd return to Saint-Noel together, so I guess this works out fine.

The group remaining in Perujin were in the process of negotiations that would change the very course of history, but the significance of this occasion was entirely lost on Mia, who had no idea such epic developments were underway. Instead, she hopped on her carriage with Ludwig, Anne, and Bel, and departed the agricultural country.

With Chloe, Tatiana, and Rania absent, a quieter ambience settled over the vehicle.

"It's...certainly roomier in here now, isn't it?" Mia mused.

There was a distinct melancholy in the air—the kind thickest following a festive celebration.

"Yes. This trip with Miss Tatiana was a lot of fun," agreed Anne, her tone similarly somber.

"It sure was."

Fruit-picking, the first sight of the capital, the days spent in Auro Ardea's cake-shaped castle, the dance practice... Events floated through her mind one after another, coalescing into a shining tapestry of summer memories.

“Indeed. It was a most fruitful time that we spent here,” said Ludwig with a classic finger-to-glasses gesture. “If at all possible, I would have liked to stay a little longer...”

Even he seemed to be having a sentimental moment.

My, that’s not something I expected to hear from him. I thought for sure he was the type to snort at things like reminiscing about summer memories, thought Mia with a curious tilt of her head.

She turned to Bel.

“And you must be glad too, Bel. Your summer will be in Lunatear this year, so you’ll have lots of time to spend with Rina.”

Last year, to Bel’s extreme dismay, she’d lost her summer to supplementary exams. This year, she wasn’t heading back, so there were no tests for her to take before the holidays. The cost, of course, was a hellish gauntlet of makeup exams after the break. Judging by Bel’s live-in-the-moment approach to life, though, Mia figured she wasn’t too bothered by that fact. Bel’s response, however...

“Um... Miss Mia, I think I understand now,” said the young girl, her expression surprisingly sober.

“Huh? Understand what?”

“I understand the danger of thanking people by giving them money.”

“...Huh.”

Faced with Bel’s unflinchingly steady gaze, Mia momentarily found herself at a loss for words. So she folded her arms and gave Bel a prompting look to continue, effectively hiding her mental blank.

“That man, Mr. Shalloak... He fell for the allure of money,” Bel said. “It led him astray, making him think it’s more important than anything else. Making money became the entire purpose of his work.”

“True. An imbalance of labor and reward robs people of their motivation to work,” Ludwig supplemented. “Those who gain too great a sum of wealth too easily end up craving ways to gain similar sums with similar ease. Their goal becomes earning as much money as possible through as little work as possible.”

Bel nodded. “That’s why we shouldn’t thoughtlessly hand people lots of money—because it might become a source of misfortune for them. I finally understand that now.” She refocused her gaze at Mia. “You’ve always told me that what’s important isn’t money, and you backed that up with your

actions."

Mia reflected on said actions.

Hmm, I suppose I did *say money isn't everything, though that was just to drive Shalloak up the wall.*

Her true motivation wasn't something she was comfortable sharing with her granddaughter.

"You were doing the 'actions speak louder than words' thing, right? And trying to teach me how I should conduct myself as a princess of the empire?" Bel asked.

Was I? I'm pretty sure I wasn't...

She arched a perplexed eyebrow. Then, realizing the revealing implication of the expression, quickly arched the other as well before pressing both eyes shut. The motions, viewed in sequence, more or less resembled a deliberate nod.

"So you were... I thought so."

"If I may be so bold, Miss Bel, you should know that Her Highness frequently behaves in such a manner," said Ludwig. "At times, she thinks in so many dimensions that our initial interpretations of her behavior can be misleading. When in doubt, I recommend that you err on the side of caution and verbally confirm the accuracy of your understanding..." He propped up his glasses ever so intelligently. Being a pioneer Mia interpreter, he spoke from a place of abundant personal experience.

"Yes, I'll do that, Professor Ludwig," answered Bel, casually slipping in an honorific before his name. Then, she turned back to Mia.

"Miss Mia, what you're trying to tell me is that as a princess of the empire, I should behave in a way that lives up to the kindness and compassion I've received from others. Is that right?" She closed her eyes and placed her palms over her chest. "That dance, the amendment to the treaty between Tearmoon and Perujin, and the establishment of a new relationship between the two... I now see that it was all a part of living up to what the Perujin people have done for us. They treated us well, so we should remember that and act in accordance...which is exactly what you did."

The searing earnestness of her gaze forced Mia's eyes to reflexively wander. "Uh-huh. R-Right, that's... Right. Of course. Oho ho."

“But, uh... I do think, Bel, that it comes down to that in the end. A lot of people have helped you out, and to pay them back, you should pursue the best life possible. Live up to their kindness by living for yourself. Find your own happiness. That, in my opinion, is what the people who helped you would want to see.”

Mia was no philosopher, but when she looked at Bel, she couldn’t help but feel that the Annes, Ludwigs, Elises, and all the other people of all those futures who offered Bel their love and care would want nothing more than for her to be happy.

“But don’t sweat it too much. Even if you don’t get around to repaying everyone, I’ll do it for you by making this empire better. So relax a little and take it easy—it’ll be fine.”

She smiled gently at Bel, who responded with a perky “Okay, Miss Mia!” and the kind of carefree, grinning nod so befitting a girl her age.

Side Chapter: Untold Histories of Wheat —The Mythical Great Famine—

History has no place for “what ifs.” Nevertheless, human nature is to spread the wings of imagination and soar the skies of possibility, exploring fantasies of what might have been. What if that historical figure were still alive? What if that war were won by a different nation? Amongst the myriad “what ifs” that permeate the collective consciousness of scholars, there is a single one that keeps them all up at night—what if cold-resistant wheat hadn’t been discovered at that crucial juncture? Wouldn’t a famine of unprecedented scale have ravaged the whole continent?

The “Mia No. 5”—currently one of the most prominent strains grown throughout the continent—is based on seed stock first discovered and developed by Arshia Tafrif Perujin and Cyril Rudolvon. The pair made their breakthrough just as the continent was entering an enduring period of cold summers. Having found a promising species of wheat in Outcount Gilden’s domain up near the northern border of the Tearmoon Empire, they promptly began to improve it through selective breeding. Two years later, a strain of wheat named “Mia No. 2” appeared in the markets, but initial reception was less than enthusiastic...

“Ugh, give me a break. Why is wheat so damn expensive?”

The man groaned bitterly at the grains for sale in the imperial capital’s marketplace. Wheat prices were up one and a half times compared to previous years—not quite unaffordable, but certainly worth a sour word or two.

“I heard yields this year are no better. Everywhere’s seeing shortages, so if anything, the prices are gonna keep going up,” quipped the merchant before him.

“For the love of... How’s a man supposed to feed hi— Oh? Why’s *this* wheat so cheap?”

The man's gaze stopped at a bag of wheat whose price tag showed a number consistent with the prices he'd known before.

"Oh, those're special. Supplied directly by the government."

"The government is supplying wheat...?"

The merchant smiled wryly at his bewilderment. "There's a lot of it in circulation, but the quality's sort of...you know."

"Not great, huh?" the man surmised from the merchant's hand gesture.

"At least not when made into bread. It's too sticky, and gets too stiff in the oven. Flavor's not great either."

The man rolled his eyes. "Wouldn't you know it...? I swear, sometimes, you wonder if the higher-ups are all a bunch of clowns. What were they thinking pushing this kind of stuff into..." His badmouthing paused when he saw the name imprinted on the bag of wheat. "Mia No. 2? What's this supposed to mean?"

"The name of the wheat, apparently," answered the merchant. "Word is they made it in Her Highness's academy city."

"Huh. Her Highness, you say..."

A vision of the princess and her magnanimous manner flitted through the man's mind. He recalled the Birthday Festival this past winter and the food provided by the nobles. Scenes of bloated bellies and cheerful chanting resurfaced one after the other, as drunkenly sung birthday wishes echoed in his ears.

"Wheat made by Her Highness, huh..." His gaze softened.

"Hm? Something the matter?" asked the merchant.

"Wha? Oh, no."

He swallowed the somewhat unflattering comment of the princess that had been climbing up his throat, for fear of being charged for lèse-majesté. If he were to be honest though, there was something about the wheat and its edible-but-not-very-tasty qualities that reminded him of the princess herself. The way her generosity was marred...or perhaps accentuated by the creeping sense that somewhere below the regal exterior was just a lovable idiot... It was strangely endearing, just like this wheat. But he couldn't possibly say that out loud.

"I mean, I guess it's better than nothing, right? Beats starving to death, that's for sure." The man laughed and bought a bag of Mia No. 2 wheat. He wasn't the only one. Reactions from others were similar. Driven by their

fondness for their princess, they all chose to take home a sack of the wheat that bore her mark.

So it was that Mia No. 2 slowly trickled into the hands of buyers, sales fueled more by its name than quality. This situation did not last long, for soon after the wheat's introduction into the market, an exceedingly devoted man took it upon himself to right what he saw as a terrible wrong.

"I will not stand for this! A strain of wheat bearing Her Highness's name must not be seen as inferior! This egregious situation requires an immediate solution!"

The man who rose to the challenge was the empire's most accomplished culinarian and head chef of the imperial court, Musta Waggman. Holding firmly to the belief that the failure to produce good food was the fault of not the ingredient but the method of preparation, he sought to develop a new way of using the wheat. If it was a poor match for bread, then it might be suited to something else... Deliberately discarding the established paradigms of traditional cooking, he thought flexibly and tested liberally. Eventually, he discovered the answer. The best way of preparing Mia No. 2 wheat was not to bake it, but to *boil* it. What came out of the pot was something white with a delightfully springy texture.

The head chef eagerly brought his creation to Mia, who took one bite and said, with the utmost casualness, something that blew his mind wide open.

"I think this would go very well with that sweet bean paste I had the other time."

It was true that they'd ordered some sweet beans through Forkroad & Co. some time ago, but it had never crossed Musta's mind to mix the paste with this new creation. He promptly tried it and realized that *this* was the true answer. His creation was at last complete!

Thus, the head chef's Wheat Project ft. Mia bore fruit in the form of a dumpling they called the *fullmoon dango*. It spread like wildfire from market to home to plate, and soon became referred to as *Mia dangos*. White and springy with a delectable stickiness, the dango's inherent texture was perfectly complemented by the sweet bean paste spread over it and proved popular with all ages. This led to an apparent paradox that fueled dinner chatter for some time. How was it, the people of Tearmoon wondered, that

they were supposed to be in the midst of a wheat shortage, but instead of starving, they were all enjoying this delicious new food?

Not long after, Arshia and Cyril released another strain, Mia No. 3, into the market, which was soon followed by Mia No. 4. These newer strains of the Mia series, through extensive selective breeding, had gained qualities that made them more similar to traditional wheat. Despite that, Mia No. 2 remained a household favorite, and its popularity dwindled little with the introduction of its latter brethren.

"Seeking Outcount Gilden for his help... Sending Cyril Rudolvon and Princess Arshia up north, where they discovered cold-resistant wheat and initiated their selective breeding project... Purchasing sweet beans through Forkroad & Co..."

One by one, Ludwig committed the events of five years ago to paper, sighing deeply as he did. The people of Tearmoon, content in their current prosperity, did not—and might never—know how close the empire had come to calamity. The Great Famine, once a real and dire threat to every soul and fortune, had become but a mythical specter of an unrealized future. However ethereal it had become, however, it would not escape his eyes.

"If Her Highness hadn't taken each and every one of those steps..."

Had they not stocked up on provisions and secured supply routes for food from distant sources, a great many would have been lost to starvation. They could have chosen to save their own, but that would have likely led to wars with neighboring nations over food, draining the treasuries of all those involved and condemning their people to further suffering.

"I still remember how much I struggled when Her Highness said we should provide relief to nations in need even if it meant digging into our own provisions. I wasn't sure whether to support her or admonish her..."

In the end, the appearance of the Mia No. 2 strain solved the looming food crisis, allowing them to evade the issue entirely. When Ludwig first heard that selective breeding efforts had successfully produced an agriculturally viable strain of cold-resistant wheat and that the initial discovery had been made in Outcount Gilden's domain, it'd taken him a good few minutes to retrieve his jaw from the ground. The reactions of his peers were identical. Mia hadn't just solved the empire's food problems; she'd saved all nearby nations from a great famine.

"Had there been no Princess Mia, there would surely have been a

widespread famine...and the history of this continent would have entered a chapter of deep tragedy." He shuddered at the thought.

History has no place for "what ifs."

Even so, Ludwig couldn't help but wonder. What if the era in which he lived hadn't been graced by the genius that was Mia Luna Tearmoon? What would have happened to the world?

History has no place for "what ifs."

That was why the path of a newly devised confection was the only one the Tearmoon Empire could take.

Even so, people couldn't help but spread their wings of imagination. What if this had happened that way? What might have been then?

Conjecture, however, would ultimately remain conjecture. The fact of the matter was that the wheat which banished the great famine to the realm of myth would leave a long and enduring mark in history.

This illustrious strain of wheat was Mia No. 2. It bore the name of the Great Sage of the Empire. Consequently, it also bore the name of the Tearmoon Empire's very first—

Chapter 6: To Each Their Own Summers

Halfway through their journey back to the imperial capital, Ludwig began speaking in a deliberate manner. “Your Highness, allow me to offer my formal congratulations for your masterful resolution of the Perujin dilemma.”

“Hm... Well, thank you, but for me, it really wasn’t that big of a deal. I didn’t even need to do much, really,” Mia replied with no small amount of pride.

Let us not forget that she really *didn’t* do much. Specifically, she picked some fruits, walked up a slope in her bare feet, danced, and got to know her friend’s dad. That was about it. For her, it was more or less a regular summer vacation. And a rather enjoyable one at that! Anyway...

“On a related note,” said Ludwig, “regarding the issue of becoming empress... Doing so would doubtlessly require the support of foreign dignitaries. In that sense, establishing friendly relations with Perujin should prove invaluable. Though small in scale, Perujin is a close neighbor and ally. The support of their royal family may very well help tip the scales in our favor.”

The social dynamics within Saint-Noel Academy were effectively a miniature version of the political dynamics of nations within the cultural sphere centered around the Holy Principality of Belluga. The tightly knit—at times suffocatingly so—relationships between students were highly representative of their nation-level counterparts. Nobles did not limit their friend-making to compatriots. That kind of border-spanning networking was also, conveniently, the very kind of friend circle Mia had hoped to establish at the academy.

“Therefore, it would be wise to continue establishing relations with influential persons of other nations until the day of your coronation.”

“True. After all, having lots of personal connections will be very

important for becoming Tearmoon's very first empress," agreed Mia, all the while hoping that said coronation would never actually come to pass.

"With that said, I believe that your success in gaining the support of Lady Rafina and Prince Sion was a crucial feat, for it allowed us to make a statement to all the nobles during the Birthday Festival. It was a stroke of brilliance, truly."

"Oho ho, you're giving me far too much credit."

He was, but...

Huh. Now that I think about it... At this rate, maybe I'm not actually that far from becoming empress. I mean, Miss Rafina's backing me. Sion too, and he's the future king of Sunkland. With that kind of political support, maybe...

The realization that most of the heavy lifting might already be done made the whole empress thing feel considerably more interesting.

Hmm... That reminds me. Lately, I haven't been reading the Chronicles. I should go take another look once I get back.

Thus, Mia's group returned to the capital.

Meanwhile, at Saint-Noel Academy...

Rafina Orca Belluga, book in hand, was patiently awaiting a guest in her private room. She managed to get some good reading done before there was a knock on her door. A young man entered. He brimmed with the rugged energy of an outdoorsman. His long black hair was tied back, and his strong, lean yet firm frame was almost mesmerizing to behold.

Rafina smiled politely at Lin Malong.

"Hello, Malong. It's been a while since we've seen each other."

"It sure has, Miss Rafina." He held up his hand, greeting her in his usual nonchalant fashion.

"I'm sorry to ask you to come back after graduating, but I'd really appreciate it if you could keep looking after the horses."

"It's all good. I was starting to miss them myself, to be honest. Was hoping to check on them at some point. Besides, it's not like the Equestrian Kingdom always stays in one place. Popping by whenever the camp happens to be close is no problem."

Prompted by Rafina, he took a seat across from her. On his side of the

table was a cup of skyred tea, an Equestrian favorite. Without the slightest hesitation, he downed the lightly steaming drink in a single gulp, then looked at her.

"...Well? Let's hear it then. What'd you actually call me here for?"

"Gosh, what's that supposed to mean? Can't a girl just invite a good friend over for some tea?"

"Most girls can, but not *this* girl. I've known you for too long to believe you've got the spare time to be drinking tea with someone like me."

"Is that so, Mr. Lin Malong, next in line to be chief of the Forest Lins, the most powerful clan of the Equestrian Kingdom? It seems to me that there is political value in simply sitting down with you."

Rafina let a brief silence hang before continuing.

"But, I suppose time is indeed precious, and I hear you're quite busy, so I'll get to the point." She gazed calmly into his eyes. "Are you aware of the attempt on Princess Mia's life this past winter?"

"Someone ordered a hit on the little miss? That's news to me," he said, brows rising a little in surprise. "Last I saw her, she seemed fit as a fiddle."

"By the Lord's mercy, she managed to escape unharmed...but the assailant was a man who rode a horse that could run faster than Kuolan, who's a Skyred Hare. He was also an expert swordsman, and on top of that, commanded two wolves."

"A horse on par with Kuolan, and a rider who trains wolves, huh..." He crossed his arms. The trademark aloofness in his expression had vanished, replaced by a stern frown.

"Yes, and I was wondering if you might have any idea as to the man's identity," said Rafina. She took a sip of her tea, all the while keeping her gaze on his face. "Because I recall hearing something long ago about a lost clan in the Equestrian Kingdom..."

Malong nodded slowly.

"This past winter, huh...? Might have something to do with the bandits stirring up trouble near the outskirts of Sunkland, then..."

Chapter 7: Sion in Crisis and Mia in Thought

After returning to the capital, Mia immediately flipped open the copy of the Chronicles she'd borrowed from Bel. To be clear, she was just intending to give it a quick skim. Nothing serious. Having been lectured by Ludwig on the importance of garnering support from the nobility of nearby nations, she figured she had it made. After all, she was already on pretty good terms with Rafina and Sion. As long as they—two of the most influential figures in the continent—called for her support, backs would surely bend toward her like reeds in the wind. The road to empress seemed, in that moment, like a short walk in the park.

Alas, confidence spawned carelessness. As she picked up the book, she was already imagining passages about a future where she survived the poisoning to become empress. At the same time, a part of her was also expecting nothing to change. She'd been burned before. It was better to keep her expectations in check. It was probably still the same old chapters describing the same old death. The thought of revisiting that vivid depiction of her own end cut her desire to read in half, but she nonetheless forced herself to open the book. Then, she forced herself to open her eyes. What she saw on its pages...

"H-Huh?! What in the moons is *this* supposed to be?!"

Her mind reeled from the words, delivered like a hammer to her brain, for it read...

"Sion Sol Sunkland perished in his youth."

"What? B-But... How? Wasn't Sion supposed to become King of Sunkland? And get a cheesy nickname and stuff? What was it? The Libra King or something?"

She hurriedly read through the changed contents, only to find that Sion apparently lost his life in a skirmish with a gang of bandits.

"*Huh*?! What was that damn kid thinking? Why in the moons would he

go out there himself? Just let the soldiers handle it!" she groused before seeing something else alarming. "Wait... What? There's only thirty days left until this happens?!"

After her initial frustration passed, she reconsidered her stance, realizing that this was in fact the very kind of thing Sion was inclined to do. Considering how he seemed to see himself as some sort of embodiment of justice, news of a gang of bandits causing problems could very well lure him out from safety. Worse yet, she had heard that the kind of "justice is best served personally" vibe was pervasive throughout Sunkland, which only increased the risk of this happening. The idea that royalty was an example for the masses and should always lead the charge in battle was all but common sense in that kingdom. When faced with danger, hunkering down in a safe room in the castle was not an option for them. Moreover, when their people were being exposed to the threat of banditry, royals and nobles alike were expected to be first on the scene with armies close behind. Failure to live up to this image would cast doubt on their sense of justice, and therefore, the rightfulness of their elevated status.

Remno had a similar culture. There, kings were expected to be valiant and daring. Royalty who didn't command armies held no right to the throne. It was this culture that had once led to Abel spearheading an army in person to quell a rebellion.

"It's also possible that somebody could purposefully take advantage of that expectation in Sunkland to bait Sion into risking his life."

Perhaps the bandit activity was a trap from the start, and Sion was actually set up. Mia folded her arms and entered deep-analysis mode.

"Wait, let me think about this... Maybe this is actually fine? I-I mean, it's not like it bothers me if Sion dies. He did lop my head once, after all. And he can be so irritating sometimes. Besides..."

Deep-analysis mode lasted not even a minute before she conceded, "No, I can't just let him die. It'd leave a terrible aftertaste."

Had it happened without her knowledge, it'd be different. To be in a position to prevent it from happening and not do so was too heartless an option for her to bear.

"We've had our differences, but he did come to my aid when I needed help. I owe him for that. Oh, and I guess there's no guarantee that whoever takes the throne in his place would be supportive of me. And Bel's pretty

fond of him too...”

Soon, she made up her mind.

“Right. I think I do need to do something about this.”

If this were a mere accident, she could simply drop a line to either Sion and Keithwood and tell them to either send more soldiers or beef up security.

“I probably can’t convince them to keep Sion from heading out in the first place, though...”

That would be overstepping into domestic affairs, not to mention a mere warning seemed futile in the face of Sion’s personality.

“It’s also possible for this to be a Serpent conspiracy.”

That line of thinking made more sense. It seemed unlikely that sparring with a couple of bandits would lead to Sion losing his life.

“He’s got a pretty mean sword arm, and Keithwood’s with him too. There’s no way a random bandit would have any chance of killing him.”

And if the Serpents were indeed involved, that would significantly complicate matters.

“If we’re dealing with Serpents, I’d much rather send Dion over, but that would probably dent Sunkland’s pride...”

The Empire’s Finest would doubtlessly dismantle whatever nefarious traps they were laying, but she had no politically viable excuse for dispatching him. A minor nation might have stomached any complaints, but the Kingdom of Sunkland was on par with the empire in size and strength alike. They probably wouldn’t look favorably upon a request to add a Tearmoon agent to the unit tasked with guarding their crown prince.

“I mean, I’m sure Sunkland has plenty of capable soldiers, but I can’t exactly just order them to tag along with Sion.”

She could often have her way with such arrangements within the empire. If only this wasn’t a foreign affair.

“Ugh, it’s so frustrating how I can’t just tell people I know what’s going to happen in the future. There must be something I can do... Come on, think...”

At the current rate, all she could do was warn him to be careful. Perhaps alerting him to the possibility of a conspiracy would be enough. Or, perhaps, it wouldn’t be. She wasn’t entirely comfortable with putting all her eggs in that shaky basket. Especially considering Sion might take that as an

opportunity to purposefully put himself in danger and track down the mastermind behind it all.

“Hnnngh, this is giving me a headache...” she grumbled.

“Excuse me, milady. Miss Esmeralda is here...”

Anne’s voice pulled Mia out of her mental quagmire.

“Oh? Esmeralda? Hm...”

Mia rubbed her tummy.

“Hmm... I need to do a lot of thinking, and sugar is the fuel of thought, so I think it’s time to do some refueling!”

For the time being, she turned her thoughts to the delicacies Esmeralda had no doubt brought with her.

Chapter 8: Aboard the H.I.M.S. Mia

“Miss Mia! Oh, you won’t believe what just happened to me!” cried Esmeralda upon entering the room.

“My, what’s the matter? You seem terribly upset,” asked Mia as she snuck a glance at Esmeralda’s hand, from which hung...absolutely nothing!

No delicacies!

As Mia visibly wilted, Anne poked her head in to say, “Milady, Lady Esmeralda brought some baked sweets as a gift, so I’m going to prepare them now.”

“My! Is that so, Esmeralda? You really don’t have to, you know,” said Mia, immediately perking back up. Her mood was entirely contingent on the existence of munchies.

“Oho ho, I can hardly show up empty-handed now, can I? To be perfectly honest, it’s something a merchant brought us when visiting...” said Esmeralda in an apologetic tone.

Mia, however, was pleased by the recycled nature of the gift. It suggested that Esmeralda had taken her admonishment of wasteful spending to heart and chosen not to purchase premium-quality sweets.

“And to be perfectly honest as well, good for you, Esmeralda. I asked you to cut down on your spending, and that’s exactly what you did. I’m so glad to hear it.”

In Mia’s eyes, all sweets were made equal, and in no way were some sweets more equal than others. How and from where they were procured was utterly irrelevant. In fact, if they were procured frugally from an inexpensive source, that only made them better.

Once the two of them were seated at the table and a number of teacakes were placed before them, Esmeralda returned to her original subject matter.

“Anyway, as I was saying, you won’t believe what happened to me, Miss Mia!” she cried. “My father is just the worst!”

“My, what happened with your father? I thought you were on very good terms with him,” Mia asked half-heartedly. Quarter-heartedly, really. The

rest of her heart was focused on the teacakes. They smelled so sweet. So *sugary*. Just as her nostrils began palpitating in anticipation...

"Good terms?! Not anymore, no! He's telling me to *get married*! Can you believe it? He's got the whole thing arranged! Utterly unforgivable!" lamented an outraged Esmeralda.

"My... Congratulations, then...?"

For women of the nobility, a potential marriage was a matter of great importance. Though Esmeralda was still a student at Saint-Noel, she was old enough to be receiving a marriage proposal from time to time.

"There's nothing to congratulate here! He's trying to marry me off to a Sunkland noble!"

"Oh. Sunkland. I see..."

"Oh, uh, but even if I end up going to Sunkland," Esmeralda added hastily upon seeing Mia's muted reaction, "rest assured that I'll still keep my promise with you, Miss Mia."

Nevertheless, she was met with a quiet, "You won't be in Tearmoon anymore... It's going to get lonely around here..."

Mia's eyes remained downcast. It just so happened that the angle perfectly aligned them with the teacakes on the table, but perhaps that was entirely coincidence. After all, she *was* very fond of the treats Esmeralda always brought for her, and their tea parties were something she always looked forward to. Moreover, there weren't a whole lot of noble girls of similar age with whom she could share an honest chat. Esmeralda was like an older cousin, and she had few, if any, replacements. If her marriage took her to Sunkland, there would be far fewer chances for tea parties. That was a rather dispiriting thought.

"Miss Mia..."

Looking up, Mia found to her surprise a teary-eyed Esmeralda, whose expression soon gained a sheen of resolve.

"B-But don't worry, because I'm going to reject it, of course! I was always intending to. I'd never leave my best friend behind to marry off to some foreign kingdom!" she declared with a determined pump of her fists.

"Huh? Uh, you can get married if you want. It's not really—"

"No, I've decided! I'm going to tell them to call it off! In fact, I'll do it today! I've been invited to the royal castle in Sunkland for a party, but they can take their party and stuff it—"

“Hold it.” Mia’s ears picked up a word she couldn’t ignore. She eyed her friend questioningly. “Elaborate, please.”

“Hm? They invited me to their castle. If I get married, I’ll be closer to their royal family, so they arranged a party as a sort of icebreaker. Not that it matters, of course, since I won’t be going—”

“What do you mean you won’t be going? That’d be such a waste. They put so much time and effort into arranging it, didn’t they? You might as well go and enjoy yourself,” said Mia as a plan began to take shape in her head. “In fact, I’ll go with you.”

How could she best save Sion from his impending death? Without a doubt, it was to guard him. Preferably by having Dion Alaia hang around him twenty-four seven. But even if she managed to protect him from one attack, would it change his fate?

Probably not...

Her gut said no. The Serpents had gone completely quiet since the winter, but she didn’t believe for a second that they’d righted their scheming ways. If Sion’s assassination was indeed their doing...

Stopping them once can’t possibly be enough. I’m sure I’ll just end up finding a new passage in the Chronicles talking about how he died some other way.

Recognizing this fact was good, but so long as she remained in Tearmoon, the whole incident would be out of her reach. What should she do then? The answer was obvious.

I need to get myself to Sunkland. That’s the most reliable solution. I’ll need protection, so that gives me an excuse to bring Dion along. Hm... Maybe I should ask our resident poison-expert Citrina to come too. Poison is a staple of assassinations, after all. Also, I’ll probably have to spend a good few nights there, and I’ll definitely feel better with some bodyguards who can always stay within close proximity, so I’ll try asking Tiona and Liora too...

Now, standard protocol dictated that a Tearmoon princess could not simply declare she was heading to Sunkland out of the blue and expect to leave any time soon. Guard convoys had to be arranged, and Sunkland needed time to prepare things on their end as well. Her excursion to Perujin certainly happened earlier than planned, but that was the thing—it had already been planned. They’d simply shifted the schedule up a little. As for

the time she went to Remno... Well, she'd thrown protocol out the window for that, so it wasn't exactly a viable reference. She couldn't sneak her way into Sunkland—not if she wanted to get close enough to Sion to protect him. That required her to enter their kingdom through official means.

Fortunately, if I claim to be going as a member of Esmeralda's retinue, it might just work. Instead of an official sojourn by the princess of Tearmoon, it's an Etoiline paying them a visit, and I'm just along for the ride.

When it came to Tearmoon VIPs, Esmeralda was second only to Mia. The necessary preparations for a daughter of the Four Dukes to head abroad wasn't too different from that of the princess. Most importantly, said preparations were already done. They just had to beef up the security ever so slightly.

All things considered, it seemed...surprisingly feasible. To her, at least. To any official tasked with implementing this sudden change, it was nothing short of a nightmare, but their future screams of frustration did not reach the present ears of Mia. Unaware of this discrepancy between reality and expectation, she continued to plot out the ensuing parts of her plan, effectively engaging in unhatched-chicken-counting.

Hmm... Once I save Sion, the whole royal family of Sunkland's going to owe me a big favor. That'll come in very handy when I'm doing the empress thing!

Arms folded, she nodded to herself.

"I'm going with you, so make some room for me— Huh?"

As she turned her attention back to Esmeralda, she found her friend teary-eyed once again.

"Oooh, Nina..." Esmeralda sobbed, looking to her nearby attendant. "D-Did you hear? Miss Mia said she's coming along to cancel my marriage for me... She's going to tell them to their face!"

"Yes, I certainly did hear, milady. I'm glad for you," replied Nina, in her usual dispassionate tone as she held out a handkerchief.

Esmeralda took it and dabbed at her eyes.

"Thank you, Miss Mia. This means a lot. It really does. To know you're willing to go so far for me..."

The sheer earnesty of her joy made Mia feel a tad guilty, so she decided to throw her friend a bone. Placing her arms on her hips, she declared, "Wh-Why of course I'd be willing to. We're best friends, aren't we? Now that

I’m coming with you, you can rest easy, because Captain Mia is at the helm!”

And so the H.I.M.S. (Her Imperial Majesty’s Ship) Mia set sail bearing the weight of both Esmeralda’s and Sion’s future. Did its wave-riding captain have what it takes to navigate the stormy seas ahead? Only time would tell.

Chapter 9: Ludwig...Gets the Hint

With her mind made up, Mia promptly began preparing for her trip to Sunkland. First, she summoned Ludwig and asked him to arrange her guard convoy.

"Understood. I shall put together a squad composed of our most competent Princess Guard then." Long accustomed to keeping up with the abrupt nature of Mia's whims, he let out a resigned sigh.

"I'll leave it to you then," said Mia. "Oh, and I'd like to take Dion with me as well. Will that be all right?"

"Sir Dion, you say..." Ludwig nudged the bridge of his glasses contemplatively as he regarded her. "Should I take that to mean there is sufficient danger surrounding this excursion to warrant his presence?"

"Maybe. It's a precaution." She shrugged. "Obviously, the best-case scenario is that it ends up being perfectly safe, but you never know, and I can't exactly take an army with me into Sunkland. A small force of elite guards is simply our most feasible choice."

She also couldn't declare outright that she was going to prevent Sion from being killed. With her daredevil antics this past winter putting Ludwig thoroughly on edge, Mia was well aware that she'd really been pushing it lately. Even if her plan *was* to stop an assassination on Sunkland's crown prince, Mia doubted that Ludwig would just let her go willy-nilly. And so she decided to fudge her reasoning.

"...I see."

To her unease, he regarded her for a while before doing that uncomfortably penetrating stare-while-adjusting-glasses gesture.

"In that case, I shall accompany Your Highness to Sunkland."

"Huh?"

"Abrupt developments like this tend to beget unforeseen problems. My presence may prove useful. I've also been meaning to have some private words with Sunkland's administration."

"But aren't you—"

“All right then, I shall excuse myself now. I need to arrange substitutes for my work before we depart.”

He left before Mia could get another word in.

“Huh. Well, I guess it can’t *hurt* to have him along. Maybe this is for the better.”

It wasn’t like she could unravel the conspiracy herself. Her involvement was just an excuse to get her ace in the hole, Dion, into Sunkland. That solved the brawn side of the equation, but she still needed to get some brains. The only concern was how Ludwig’s absence would impact all the problems he was currently dealing with in the empire.

“Knowing him, though, he’ll probably make sure everything keeps spinning like clockwork,” she murmured to herself.

Trusting Ludwig to handle everything on his side, she turned her attention to the next part of her preparations and penned a letter to Tiona in the Rudolvon domain. This past winter had convinced Mia that Tiona and Liora could both pull some serious weight in battle.

“I’ll feel a lot safer with them around. There are plenty of places where I can’t have men following me, after all, and Anne’s not much of a fighter.”

There was one more person she’d prefer to bring—someone who could prove to be invaluable in a pinch.

“Hmm... Yes, I should definitely bring *her*,” Mia mused. “Anne, I need to head out for a bit, so get things ready for me, could you?”

“Right away, milady, but could I ask where we’re going?” asked her slightly concerned maid.

Mia smiled. “Don’t worry. I’m heading to downtown Lunatear where all the nobles live.”

Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon currently resided in a villa located in the imperial capital of Lunatear. As for why Mia was privy to this information... Well, it was because Citrina came this morning to visit Bel. After hearing that her friend had returned from Perujin, she’d shown up at the Whitemoon Palace in high spirits and invited Bel to her villa.

“She claimed they were going to study, but I’d be surprised if they even went so far as to flip open a textbook.”

Mia knew her granddaughter. Without a stern guardian looking over her, there was no way she was actually going to study.

“Lynsha’s gone home for a while, so I guess I’ll have to play her role in the meantime,” Mia muttered as she walked up to the Yellowmoon villa.

It was a large mansion, larger than the residences of most nobles, and Mia caught herself staring in fascination at its vine-covered walls and the veritable jungle that was its front yard.

I-I wonder if all of these are poisonous... she thought as she stepped into the building with her guards. They were shown to a wide courtyard inside. Here, well-pruned flowers decorated a far tamer garden. At the far corner was a table where Citrina could be seen sitting. In front of her, Bel was...

Bel was *dancing*!

“And then, right here, you hit the clappers.”

Using her hands as makeshift clappers, she struck them together. Evidently she was demonstrating to Citrina the dance she’d performed in Perujin. Or trying to, at least.

“And then, you do this!” She spun a few times, then clapped again before posing triumphantly.

“Oh moons, she literally did every step wrong,” mumbled Mia.

The girl’s dancing was just...kind of...

It’s hard to pinpoint what’s wrong, but the whole thing just feels...off. Also, what is it with this girl and her ability to get everything wrong in the dance, yet still act like she just pulled off the most impressive feat ever? It’s...actually pretty amazing. Maybe I should be more like her...

Feeling a newfound admiration for her granddaughter, she walked over.

“Ah, Miss Mia. You’re here!” Bel smiled upon seeing her.

“Good day to you, Your Highness. Welcome to the Yellowmoon villa.” Citrina stood up and curtsied, the smiling gesture sweet and lovely like spring flowers.

And this girl’s still as cute as a doll...

“Good day to you too, Rina. Is your father doing well?”

“Yes, he’s quite fine, and he sends his regards.”

“Good. Oh, but remind him to cut back on the cookies, okay? Because eating too many sweet things will, in fact, shorten your lifespan. Did you know that?” Feeling a little overshadowed by the others, Mia promptly presented this piece of—shamelessly appropriated from Tatiana—prophylactic wisdom, which sufficiently impressed the young’uns for her to flash a smug grin.

Chapter 10: Princess Mia...Begins Her True Business!

"By the way, Bel, just a friendly reminder," said Mia. "Don't get too carried away."

"Carried away? With what?" Bel asked with a quizzical tilt of the head.

"You were demonstrating the dance we did in Perujin just now, weren't you?"

"Oh, yes, I was. Rina really wanted to see it." Bel gestured at her friend.

"I did ask her to show Rina," said Citrina. "I was curious what kind of dance it was."

"That's fine. The thing is, Bel, you were getting a lot of it wrong," said Mia, observing Citrina out of the corner of her eye. "If you're going to show someone, make sure you do it right."

Hm, I see what's going on here. Rina's disappointed that she didn't get to go to Perujin with Bel. I'd be a fool not to take advantage of this. It's just like they say: shoot the horse to fell the rider. If I want Rina to come with me, all I have to do is bring Bel!

Having quickly identified her opponent's weak point, she turned to Bel.

"Oh, and Bel, I know this is short notice, but I'm thinking of going to Sunkland with Esmeralda."

"Huh? You're going to Sunkland?!"

She grinned at the sudden flare of excitement. For Mia, who knew that Bel was short for not "Miabel" but "Maniabel," manipulating her granddaughter was like taking candy from a baby.

There's no way she'd give up a chance to visit Sion's homeland. I've got her good.

As expected, Bel nodded vigorously when asked if she'd like to follow. Seeing her reaction, Citrina's shoulders slumped visibly.

"There were so many games I wanted to play with you..."

Mia resisted the urge to scream "I knew it! I *knew* you weren't going to

study!” and said, “On that note, Rina, why don’t you come along too?”

Citrina blinked with surprise. “Huh? I can go too?”

“Certainly,” said Mia with a smiling nod. “If you’re free, of cour—”

“Yes, I’m free! I’m very free! Thank you for inviting Rina, Your Highness!” Citrina exclaimed as she dropped into a deep bow. “You have my eternal gratitude and admiration.”

“Eternal gratitude and admiration sounds like the kind of thing you should save for a more substantial occasion, but sure, I guess. But shouldn’t we check with your father first?”

“Oh, don’t worry about him. Father loves Rina to bits. He’d never say no to a request like this,” she replied with a smile which, while still sweet and flowerlike, was somehow more reminiscent of flytrap plants than garden daisies.

“Uh... Okay then. If you say so. Oh, and by the way...” Mia leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Would you mind bringing a few antidotes with you? Preferably the ones used to treat poisons often used for assassinations.”

“...Antidotes? Not the poisons themselves?” asked Citrina, frowning.

“No.” Mia shook her head. “The antidotes, please. And let me make one thing clear: I find assassinations to be a dreadful means to an end, and you’ll never find me asking you to harm another through poison, nor will I ever allow anyone to do so.”

After all, it’d be a nightmare if she were to assassinate someone and they ended up doing the same backwards time leap.

I’m a kind and forgiving person, so I’d never try to get back at Sion or Tiona, but there’s no guarantee the assassinatee would be so nice to me...

Since killing someone would always be risky, she avoided the option altogether. She even avoided creating any situations that would present the option in the first place. “Don’t make enemies” was the life philosophy to which she adhered. You never know where or when somebody might pull a Mia; in case they did, she didn’t want to be their target of vengeance.

“Besides, I’d never ask a friend of Bel to stain her hands with blood,” she stated with conviction before adding, “but I *would* appreciate it if you’d help me prevent any blood from being spilled. The situation this time is a little concerning.”

“Concerning...”

“Yes. It’s high time the Serpents started making a move. I’d prefer to be

safe than sorry. To that end, I find myself in need of Yellowmoon's expertise. Will you lend it to me?"

Citrina's back straightened at the formal wording. "Consider it lent, Your Highness. Every shred of knowledge in the Yellowmoon reservoir is yours to use. Command Rina as you wish."

"Thank you, Rina. I can ask for nothing more."

With Citrina on board, Mia's dream team was more or less complete. She had Dion and the Princess Guard to defend against acts of physical violence—gang of bandits or otherwise—Ludwig to strategically foil nefarious schemes, and Citrina to counter assassinations through poison. It'd be perfect if she could add Tatiana as a medic, but she was currently too far away to be summoned in time.

"I can't be too greedy. This is already a pretty impressive lineup. All that's left is for me to do my part..."

And so, Mia began the work that was hers and hers only—her true business.

"Let's see now... What are Sunkland's local specialties, and how many of them have mushrooms...?"

Mia's Sunkland Sojourn to ~~Savor~~ Save Sion was officially underway!

Sadly, despite paying so many visits to so many people, Mia had forgotten to pay the most crucial visit of them all—to her father, Matthias Luna Tearmoon.

"You're going to Sunkland?!" The emperor was furious upon hearing her plans. "But what about our father-daughter bonding time? I had so much planned for the summer! Bah, in that case, I shall spend my summer in Sunkland too! I'm coming with—"

"No, father! Please! I'm trying to keep the whole thing as low-key as possible!"

Though she'd ultimately convince her father to stay put, it would take daily persuasion sessions lasting until the very day of her departure before she found success.

Chapter 11: Surely... Probably...

Ever since it was decided that we'd be going to Sunkland, Her Highness hasn't been herself.

Ludwig frowned as he peered into a room in the Grand Library of the Tearmoon Empire where Mia sat muttering to herself.

It must be as I suspected, he thought. *There is far more to this journey than meets the eye. And it's something of great importance.*

When she first told him about her intention to go to Sunkland, he'd thought of two potential reasons.

The first was, of course, political friend-making—talking to people as a means of laying groundwork for future undertakings. The Kingdom of Sunkland was Tearmoon's rival in strength and scale. If Mia wished to become empress, she needed much more than Sion's support alone.

The second was Esmeralda's marriage proposal. As an Etoiline, she was one of Mia's greatest allies. While Mia had established promising relationships with the other scions of the Four Houses as well, the one she trusted most was without a doubt the young lady of Greenmoon. So long as the Four Dukes' support remained crucial to controlling the central nobility, Esmeralda would always be an extremely important asset.

And now, someone—rather, a group of someones—was trying to get her out of Tearmoon.

There are forces in play that are clearly opposed to Her Highness becoming empress... This must be their attempt to weaken her faction.

That much was both clear and perfectly comprehensible to him. He also understood how Mia's visit to Sunkland functioned as a counter. It would make domestic opposition think twice before pursuing further plans while simultaneously allowing her to probe their connections in Sunkland. Furthermore, it was a show of solidarity for Esmeralda. The issue was...

She's bringing Sir Dion. That is some serious food for thought.

He agreed that having some precautionary muscle was necessary, but the Princess Guard should have been more than enough. Why bring the one-

man-army that was Dion Alaia? What required his overwhelming presence?

"The only reasonable assumption...is that whatever's lurking in the shadows, it's dangerous enough to warrant his presence. In that case, I should prepare accordingly as well," he murmured contemplatively before walking over to Mia.

"Your Highness..."

"My, Ludwig. Are you here to do some research?"

"Yes. It has become painfully clear to me the other day that Miss Bel is lacking a great deal of fundamentals in her education."

Having heard that Bel would be coming along for the Sunkland trip, Ludwig was planning to give her a pre-departure crash course on...pretty much everything. That wasn't why he was here, though; he had come to check on Mia. Admitting his concern, however, was an act of emotional honesty far beyond him.

"Judging by her performance, I can tell that she is receiving *some* instruction, but I fear her tutor may be out of their depth. It is likely that the method of instruction is somewhat lacking. One must know when to be stern and when to be lenient. Effective integration of the two is crucial for education."

Mia's reaction was in the form of pursed lips, the meaning ambiguous.

"...Okay. Then do as you see fit. But within reason, all right? For sanity purposes."

"Of course. To damage the mental soundness of a student is a sign of extreme incompetence on the part of the educator."

"I was talking about *your* sanity..."

"I'm sorry?"

Mia gave no direct reply. Instead, she pursed her lips again before saying, "Never mind. I'll leave it to you."

"Understood." Ludwig nodded before adding, "Might I ask if Your Highness is also in the process of research?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, I suppose so. We're going to Sunkland, after all, and I figured I'd...read up on them beforehand. Figure out what's going on there, you know? So I can make plans for the trip."

Spread atop her table was a map of the entire kingdom of Sunkland. Surrounding it were numerous opened books detailing the industries and townscapes of various regions.

“I see. Your Highness never fails to impress.”

There was a clear and important goal to accomplish for this visit to Sunkland, but evidently, that wasn’t Mia’s sole focus. It seemed like she intended to tour the kingdom, and it made perfect sense for her to do so. They might as well take advantage of the opportunity to gather as much intelligence as possible. The breadth of her attention and the intensely rational way in which she optimized her time was a breathtaking sight to behold.

Food is the root of all industries, and its production is an essential factor for the empire’s future growth. Doubtlessly, she’s refining her understanding of the food circumstances in other nations to improve her judgment when she becomes empress. Her unquenchable thirst for knowledge and unwavering rationalism are surely what makes her the Great Sage of the Empire. Her Highness indeed never fails to impress...

Never fails to impress? What’s so impressive, I wonder...

Mia tilted her head quizzically at the comment before turning back to the book in her hand. It described the local delicacies of each region in Sunkland, as well as the popular dishes in each town. Nothing about its contents seemed like the kind of thing that would impress Ludwig.

But then again, I am doing *something that deserves praise, so I’ll gladly take the compliment.*

And she was right! Mia had, in fact, been using her head. And thinking about properly serious things, to boot! After much contemplation, she’d decided not to inform Sunkland about the fact that she’d be accompanying Esmeralda. She was simply going to show up as a member of her retinue. The goal of this secrecy was to keep uncertain elements to a minimum. As a seasoned reader of prophetic books, Mia knew that the future was a surprisingly delicate thing, easily altered in unpredictable ways by the slightest of her actions. Applied to her current situation, it meant that Sion’s exact circumstances of death—the where and when—were highly liable to change.

For example, if I told him I’m going as a classmate, he’d probably feel obligated to welcome me. Maybe even meet me at the border. That might keep him away from danger, but it also might not. I have no way of knowing how he might welcome me, so he still might end up dying the exact same

way.

Furthermore, his journey to the border could potentially expose him to some other unforeseen danger. A simple skirmish with bandits might be preventable in this fashion, but an elaborate conspiracy to take his life could very well follow him wherever he went.

That would only complicate matters. I'd rather have things happen the way they're currently described in the book.

That was why she'd been racking her brains the past few days—to find a way to insert herself into the story such that she'd be beside Sion on the day of his assassination without drastically changing any of the other details. Granted, it was placing Dion beside Sion that was actually important, but his role as her guardian made that discrepancy an excusable technicality.

And in order to do that, I need to make a detour somewhere. But where?!

That question was her biggest headache. The route that Esmeralda had planned wouldn't take them through the location of Sion's murder. Fate apparently wasn't willing to make things *that* easy for her.

Ideally, the detour takes me through places with lots of good food and exotic mushrooms. If I can get some fruit picking and mushroom hunting done too, that would be best.

The questionable nature of her considerations notwithstanding, the choice was indeed a tricky one. It was necessary to choose a detour route that made sense for her to request; it'd be too unnatural otherwise. Asking to stay a couple days in the middle of nowhere would cause people to ask all sorts of questions. Worse yet, Esmeralda might get bored, and a bored Esmeralda was a *dangerous* Esmeralda.

Hmm... Famous Sunkland dishes... Hm, hm... I see. Their river fish is good. Which means I can add this riverside town to the list. Then...

It was all so she could save Sion without behaving unnaturally. The meticulousness with which she planned her route was by no means in service of a secret desire to turn the trip into a sightseeing, food-feasting leisure tour through Sunkland. Surely, she was thinking about *properly serious things*.

"Oho, these dried mushrooms are a local specialty of Sunkland? I wonder where I can buy some..."

...Probably.

Chapter 12: The Royal Council

Inside Solecsudo Castle, the royal castle of the Kingdom of Sunkland, was a room with a rectangular table. Seven men sat around it. The one seated at the most central position was tall and firmly built with silver hair and sharp eyes. His ornate clothing marked him as King Abram Sol Sunkland.

Abram frowned as he listened to a report from his chancellor.

"A group of bandits unusually competent on horseback, you say..."

"That is correct, Your Majesty. They were able to outride our best cavalry and escape. Ordinary brigands, these are not. I suspect them to be agents of that roving Equestrian Kingdom."

"Intriguing... Sion, tell me your thoughts on the matter."

Sion straightened at his father's gaze. "Yes, Your Majesty. I...believe we should avoid passing judgment too eagerly."

"...And the reasoning for your caution?"

"Conflict between nations will cause much of the populace to suffer. It is premature to place the blame on the Equestrian Kingdom. I cannot imagine them attacking us for sport, and they have no reason to do so otherwise."

"Ah, Your Highness is wise, but still young," said Count Lampron, a noble whose pride for Sunkland and loyalty to his king exuded from every pore. He chuckled loudly. "Not all rulers are gifted with Your Highness's wisdom. You should not expect other kingdoms to behave as sensibly as our glorious kingdom."

"Mindless expansionism fuels the actions of many nations. There is no shortage of foolish rulers who will invade others without just cause simply to conquer more land."

"Your language is a tad too provocative for these peaceful times, Count Lampron. To some ears, they may resemble the words of a warmonger," added another participant.

"Oh? I didn't expect to hear that from you of all people."

The Royal Council was a meeting of nobility where members engaged

in political fencing. Sion, who'd had no intention of engaging with the affairs of governance until graduating from Saint-Noel, had never felt much love for the assembly. His experiences at school, however, had slightly changed his perspective. Needless to say, he was most heavily influenced by the princess of Tearmoon who, despite being the same age as him, was actively pushing for reformations in her empire.

I wonder what Mia and the others are doing right now...

In his mind's eye, he saw again her purple-clad figure. His ears, though, heard the voice of a different girl.

Tell her while I still can, or I'll regret it, huh...?

Tiona's words—so earnest, so *urgent*—reverberated against his skull. There certainly were words he wished to speak to her.

Judging by how often Mia occupies my thoughts, I'm probably... But do I, as I am right now, have the right to tell her how I feel?

His misstep in Reno haunted him to this day. Bitter regret, made harsher by the recognition of his own immaturity, pressed down on his chest like an anvil, keeping the words from reaching his mouth.

I'll make up for my past failures, but I'll earn the chance myself. I said that, and I still stand by it. But...

His rumination was interrupted by a sudden shift in the room's atmosphere. One member's comment had set the whole council astir.

"Recently, I've received reports about Equestrian troops roaming near the border. The two can't possibly be unrelated. For the sake of the people living there, it is imperative that we deploy the army immediately, if for nothing else than to assuage the fears of local Sunkland citizens," exclaimed an increasingly animated Lampron.

In terms of the political spectrum, he belonged to the conservative side, which valued tradition and espoused Sunkland expansionism. They asserted that rather than suffer under an incompetent king, it was preferable for people to be ruled by the King of Sunkland who, in his glorious wisdom, would bring them closer to prosperity. It was, incidentally, the very belief embraced by the White Crow, Graham. These expansionists were, by nature, frequently dismissive of the sovereignty of other nations.

Sion quietly sighed before speaking up in a commanding voice. "Your Majesty, at the current time, there is no need to get the army involved. With your permission, I shall organize a detachment of troops and personally lead

them there to investigate the situation."

The Royal Council was a place where myriad motives and interests clashed above and under the table. It was politics in its purest form, forcing its participants to weather sentiments both good and bad. To survive it, one had to swallow the honey with the bile. To harness it, swallow eagerly. Sion yet swallowed with difficulty, but he continued to do so, for he never lost sight of why he was here.

Was it his conviction? His commitment to upholding what was fair and right? No, it was not. The bitter events of that day had shifted the beam of his scale of justice.

What would Mia do?

Recalibrated by the Great Sage of the Empire—who neither intended nor knew how to do so—his scale now possessed a corrected set of values, allowing him to weigh situations against the philosophical masses to determine what was truly just.

"The sword of justice given to us royals is a sharp one. It cuts well and fast, but it cannot mend. Should we use it in error, many will suffer," he declared as he held his father's gaze.

"Is it not too dangerous for Your Highness to go in person?" asked an attending noble.

Sion shook his head at the call for caution. "Negligence of people who suffer chips away at the very base upon which the royal family of Sunkland stands. It damages our right to rule. However, we must also take care not to recklessly cause new suffering through our own actions. Finding the truth is imperative, and I ask again, Your Majesty, for your permission to do so."

He rose, walked in front of his father, and dropped to one knee as he bowed his head. The king regarded him with a look of satisfaction.

"I see... Very well," the king said, nodding firmly. "Your request is granted. You are now specially and formally ordered to lead a detachment of troops and subdue the bandits in question."

Thus, it was decided that Sion would command a freshly organized military detachment tasked with eliminating the bandits.

"Another ten out of ten on the reckless scale. Have you ever considered walking *away* from danger every once in a while, milord?" said Keithwood with profound exasperation after hearing about Sion's new appointment.

“Have you ever considered the consequences to Sunkland if something were to happen to you? Actually, I’m sure you have, which only makes it more baffling...”

“Come on, Keithwood. Lighten up. It’s like they say: ‘the path to a benevolent king is paved with nervous attendants.’”

“They *definitely* don’t say that.”

Sion gave him a reassuring grin. It failed to have its intended effect.

The way he’s been behaving lately... thought Keithwood. *It’s like he’s rushing to get something done. There’s a strange sense of anxiousness, even desperation...*

Keithwood could even pinpoint the exact time when Sion’s behavior had changed. It was last winter. Specifically, after they’d attended Princess Mia’s birthday festival at the Tearmoon capital.

Did something happen that day? Nothing in particular comes to mind, but...

Just then, while they were preparing for Sion’s departure...

“Sion!”

A young boy not yet in his teens came dashing toward them. His neatly trimmed hair was the same shade of silver as Sion, but his body lacked the toughened musculature of regular training. Unlike the older boy, he exuded an aura of delicate fragility.

Echard Sol Sunkland, who was turning ten this year, was the second prince of Sunkland and younger brother of Sion.

“Sion, I heard the news. Are you really going to exterminate the bandits yourself?” asked Echard, eyes blinking with concern.

Sion smiled in an attempt to comfort his brother. “That’s right. And I’ll be accompanied by only the best of our soldiers. That’s not to say I’ll be letting down my guard either. Plus, Keithwood’ll be there. I’ll be fine.”

“But... But if something were to happen to you...”

“Ha ha ha, you worry too much, Lord Echard. When His Highness was your age, he was already besting grown men at swordplay,” quipped an aging knight nearby.

The comment prompted a round of praise about Sion’s ability from the surrounding soldiers.

“His Highness is a genius swordsman. No bandit will be his match.”

“You’d know if you learned from him, Lord Echard. Why don’t you ask

His Highness for some lessons?”

Echard smiled uncomfortably at the chuckling knights.

That really isn’t doing the boy any favors... Glancing sideward at the exchange, Keithwood bit his lip. It was obvious to him that Echard was struggling with a great deal of stress, owing mostly to the crushing envy he felt toward his brother. Discord between the two princes could be exploited by politically-minded nobles for partisan gain. *I can’t exactly wade into this though. It’s not my place to speak.*

There was a small but undeniable rift between the two princes, and Keithwood could but hope that it would not grow any wider.

Chapter 13: Girls Talk... Girls Talk?

Pilgrimage Road was a major thoroughfare that connected the Holy Principality of Belluga to various other nations in the continent. It was a physical representation of the old adage, “All roads lead to Belluga.” Maintained by the Central Orthodox Church, it was well-paved and wide, even considering the heavy traffic it sustained. There was enough space for horse carriages to pass by one another without stopping.

It was on this route that Mia’s group traveled, passing through Belluga to head toward Sunkland. After meeting up with Tiona’s crew midway, they became quite the presence on the road, consisting of seven carriages and numerous escorting cavalry. Granted, riding in one of the carriages was the princess of Tearmoon; in that sense, it was—if anything—still on the more unassuming side.

“Ugh, father sure was a tough nut to crack.”

Mia heaved a deep sigh in the trundling carriage. Her father had adamantly insisted on going with her and refused to be persuaded otherwise until, in a fit of desperation, she’d given him the “I love you, dad, so pretty please?” treatment. Delivered in expressionless monotone, of course, but it worked.

“That was a herculean effort of persuasion. Moons, he’s so stubborn,” she grumbled, weariness written plain on her face.

Esmeralda shook her head. “Oh, don’t say that. His Imperial Majesty cares very much about you.” She smiled gently at Mia, but then let out a sigh of similar weariness. “Besides, if we’re talking about stubborn fathers, then I’ve definitely got you beat. I told mine I’m not interested in the marriage proposal, and he was having none of it. He wouldn’t listen to a word I said. You were right all along. Going to decline the offer directly like this is definitely the correct decision.”

“My, I’m glad you think that. But isn’t it possible that the potential groom might turn out to be a pretty good fellow? And if he’s from a Duke’s family, it might even be a pretty good match. Who knows? Maybe Lord

Greenmoon is actually looking out for you," Mia said in a reproving tone.

But her words were at odds with her thoughts.

I wonder if Lord Greenmoon is trying to distance Esmeralda from the family...

As a matter of fact, Esmeralda had a younger brother five years her junior. The boy, far from feeling inferior to his much older sister, was actually extremely fond of her. So fond as to be excessive. At times, the way he followed her around bore resemblance to an underling trailing a boss he admired. Or a poodle scampering after his beloved owner.

Esmeralda can be quite the handful, but she's actually a pretty caring person. Selfish and unreasonable at times, but I can see why he'd admire her. Still, she really can be such *a headache sometimes...*

The point is, at the current rate, the next head of the Greenmoons would end up becoming a wimpy softie with sister-attachment issues. It should also be noted that said softie was once considered as a future husband for Mia, but the talks ultimately fell apart.

Blood too thick grows muddy and summons calamity.

Due to this ancient adage, marriages between close relatives were generally shunned within the Tearmoon Empire. The relationship between Esmeralda's brother and Mia, though toeing the line of permissibility, was technically not forbidden. However...

"My brother is hardly a match for Miss Mia!" Esmeralda had adamantly opposed the arrangement. *"Miss Mia is an imperial princess. She deserves — No, she* requires *a suitable partner who is in every way a match for her. My little brother...falls a smidge short of her standards. Very short, if I'm being honest!"*

As a connoisseur of male handsomeness, she had high standards for the quality of young men, which she applied to even her own family. Given these tendencies of hers, it was perhaps possible that Duke Greenmoon didn't want her to stay at home indefinitely. Or so Mia surmised, at least.

"By the way, Esmeralda, what are you going to do if he turns out to be a dazzlingly handsome fellow?"

"Hmm, good question. I suppose I can spare a space for him in my bodyguard squad. I doubt he'd be up to snuff, though. People fit for an Etoiline like me are few and far between." Esmeralda laughed before striking her palm with inspiration. "Oh, I know! Since we're coming all this

way, why not give them an option instead of refusing them outright? I'll tell them that if they want me to marry into Sunkland, they'll have to bring me a prince!"

"Uh, you mean Sion? I wouldn't if I were you. He's...not someone you can handle."

She tried to imagine Sion and Esmeralda getting married. Nothing came. She literally could not fathom the scene.

"In terms of personality, the only people I can think of who'd be a match for Sion are Miss Rafina and, uh... Hm..."

Suddenly, she remembered the name of a girl. Currently, the girl was in a carriage behind her, but once upon a time, the girl had driven Mia from opulence to destitution and finally onto the guillotine. She was the O.G. Saint of Tearmoon, Tiona Rudolvon.

Hm, that reminds me. I wonder if Tiona and Sion got together after I died...

She'd never cared enough to devote any thought to the developments after her execution, but the two had looked to be a perfect couple in the previous timeline. Even Mia, when she wasn't busy running for dear life, had thought so. A powerful curiosity gripped her. What fate had awaited the two afterward? Did their lives ultimately intertwine?

Her distant gaze annoyed Esmeralda, who followed it to find nothing but another carriage.

"Honestly, though, I still don't know why you asked Miss Tiona to come with us. Is there something you want her to do?"

"...Okay, this shouldn't bear mentioning, but just so we're clear, Tiona is my friend. I don't want to hear any nonsense about how her being an outland noble makes her less of one," Mia warned preemptively.

Esmeralda gave a knowing nod.

"Of course. It couldn't be clearer. A friend of yours is a friend of mine. If anyone gives her a hard time, I'll be at her side to help her," she declared. Then, after a breath, she added, "Because we're best friends, and as your best friend, I'd never do something that makes you sad! That's how best friends are!"

"I-I see. Well. Good. Keep, uh...doing that then."

The confidence displayed by Esmeralda was not in any way shared by her ostensible best friend.

Chapter 14: A Gathering of Rabid Fans

“Well, this is going rather poorly.”

Ludwig gazed out the window of his carriage at the rural scenery. The gentle morning sun that had been streaming down onto the calm country road was slowly gaining the heat of noon. It was long past their scheduled departure time, but the carriage showed no hints of moving.

Abruptly, the carriage door swung open, and Dion Alaia stepped in. He removed his sword from his waist and plopped himself down on the seat. “Looks like it’s gonna be a while before they get it fixed. Damn carriage picked a fine time to break down, didn’t it?”

The trouble had begun the morning after Mia’s procession had departed from the village they’d stayed in. Not long after hitting the road, one of the carriages had suffered a broken wheel. After briefly considering the option of having the rest of the crew go ahead, they’d opted to wait for the repairs to be completed, seeing as the impaired vehicle was an expensive Greenmoon carriage. Fortunately, they could see for miles in every direction, making it unlikely for anyone to sneak up on them. At the very least, waiting here posed little risk to their safety.

“And? The patrol report?”

“All clear. I wouldn’t worry; we got the Princess Guard, and the Greenmoons sent a decently sized squad too. Plus, Sunkland sent their due diligence. They’re welcoming a daughter of one of the Four Dukes, after all. If I were a bandit, I wouldn’t even get close to us, never mind attempt a hit.”

Dion gazed out the same window with narrowed eyes.

“And I’m pretty sure the princess knows that too, which means...whatever’s out there, it ain’t bandits. It’s something trickier. Something you can’t deal with just by having a bunch of soldiers with you.”

Ludwig nodded his agreement. “We also happen to be heading in the direction that the wolfmaster fled.”

The wolfmaster, a Chaos Serpent assassin, had come uncomfortably

close to taking Mia's life before he was forced to escape. Under orders from Ludwig, a pursuing party had tried to hunt him down, only to lose track of him. Notably, it was on the outskirts of Sunkland where he'd vanished from sight. He hadn't been seen since.

"Yeah," Dion responded, "and if that bad boy shows up, regular guards aren't going to stand a chance. We're gonna need to surround him with hordes of men to deal with him, and we haven't even considered his wolves yet. I get why the princess is being extra cautious."

"I see," said Ludwig. "I'll leave matters of security to you, then. Do what you need to keep us safe. Her Highness especially. If any harm befalls her, I don't know how I'd explain it to everyone."

"You mean your Empress Faction buddies?"

"Yes. Speaking of which, I haven't introduced any of them except Gil to you. I've been meaning to do so, but..." Ludwig recalled the time he met with a number of them to discuss the delegation of work during his absence.

That day, Ludwig had rushed toward an abandoned mansion in the capital, where he and his faction members had agreed to meet. Upon arriving and entering a room in the mansion, he was greeted by a familiar voice.

"Damn, Ludwig, you finally made it!" exclaimed Balthazar. "Well? Out with it. Let's hear the delicious details of your Perujin trip."

Gilbert, along with about a dozen others, was also present.

"By god, man, at least let me sit down. What's gotten into you?" Ludwig frowned. Balthazar was usually a very composed individual, not disposed to vocal outbursts.

"What's gotten into *me*? You and your princess have gotten into me! What's this about potential treaty reform with Perujin? That's the kind of thing that makes history!"

"Well then. News sure travels fast. Yes, what you heard is correct. Her Highness has indicated that she wishes to revise the unequal treaty between our nations. She hopes this reformation will mark the beginning of a new relationship. One based on trust that we earn and maintain." Ludwig glanced up through his glasses. "What do you think? Is it the pipe dream of a delusional idealist?"

Balthazar pursed his lips for a while before shrugging. "Can't say. All I

know is that the sheer audacity of the idea is throwing me for a loop. If Her Highness is truly serious about this, then I applaud her nerve and passion, if nothing else."

"Who cares about your applause? Come on, fill us in on the juicy details already!" shouted one of the members in the room.

Just as others began to join in the heckling, an older voice from the back of the room quietly silenced them. "Now, now, keep your knickers on, boys and girls. Let the man talk." There sat the wiseman Galv, smiling.

Ludwig bowed deeply toward his former tutor. "It is a pleasure to see you again, master."

"A pleasure all around, my dear pupil. I'm glad to see you're in good health," said Galv.

"You as well, master," answered Ludwig before narrowing his eyes curiously at the old man's clothing. Unlike the time in the forest, he now wore the kind of well-tailored outfit donned by high-ranking officials.

"Hm? Ah, this. Hah, as you can tell, I've updated my wardrobe. My previous attire was, even by my standards, a tad too *rustic* for a headmaster."

Ludwig let out a breath of relief at the sight of Galv's affable smile. The Wandering Wiseman Galv was, as one might guess from his epithet, not known to stay in any one place for long. This had been a source of some worry for Ludwig, so he was glad to see his fears finally put to rest.

"That reminds me: when we were in Perujin, we enjoyed the timely aid of Princess Arshia. Did you perhaps offer her some of your wisdom?" asked Ludwig, probing Galv about Arshia, who was currently teaching in the same academy as the wiseman.

Galv chuckled. "Now there's a girl who can think for herself. I fear you might not be giving the good princess enough credit. She neither requested nor does she require my wisdom to discover the truth of things."

"I see..." said Ludwig as he walked to the back of the room and, beckoned by his peers, took a seat at Galv's table. Picking up the glass of wine before him, he took a slow sip, letting the fragrant liquid soothe his mouth and throat.

"Right, then. That should be enough small talk for everyone to get settled," said Galv. "Let's hear your story now, my good pupil. Tell us about our princess, the Great Sage of the Empire, and her exploits in Perujin."

“Fair enough.” Ludwig set the wine glass back down. “The first thing that Her Highness did...was partake in the harvest of fruits.”

He started with Mia’s rubyfruit picking session, in which she picked to her stomach’s content.

“I see. By sharing sweat and toil with the people, she sought to earn their trust... I heard that Perujin princesses are the first to the fields and that they lead their farmers by example during the harvest. Clearly, Her Highness chose to emulate their ways.”

“That’s not all. She also dined as they do. When offered a rubyfruit, she chose to eat it on the spot.”

That elicited a gasp from another man in the room. “You can’t be serious! Rubyfruits are delectable, yes, but horribly messy to eat. The sticky juice gets all over your hands. It’s notorious among women of nobility; none of them would even get within three feet of the things.”

Ludwig looked at his clueless colleague and, as the leading Mia expert in the room, explained in a pedagogical tone, “Her Highness is not one to be bothered by matters of superficial inconveniences such as this.”

Mia was indeed the type of person who didn’t mind getting her hands dirty...so long as she got to feast on delicious fruits. In that sense, Ludwig wasn’t wrong. He wasn’t exactly *right* either, but technically, he wasn’t wrong.

“Makes sense,” commented another voice. “It was offered in gratitude for her efforts. A mark of friendship, if you will. By laboring together, they’d accepted her as one of their own.”

“And by eating it,” continued another, “she then demonstrated that the acceptance was mutual... This kind of exchange would be unthinkable for the central nobility, who look down on Perujin as a vassal state...”

The wrongness of the comments only grew in magnitude.

“Next, we have the episode of the golden slope,” said Ludwig. “Are any of you aware of the way in which Perujin welcomes nobles from the empire? Master Galv, surely *you* are.”

“Indeed I am, and it’s a stupid one,” Galv spat. “They cover the slope leading to the capital with a blanket of freshly harvested wheat and have the carriages roll over it. Some brainless noble dolt from Tearmoon probably thought of the idea long ago, and it stuck. It exists for no other purpose than to literally tread on Perujin pride. Folly of the highest order, truly.”

After venting his disdain for the practice, he turned to Ludwig and said, "At the same time, it *is* a form of welcome, and as a guest, she can't afford to disregard it. Which makes me very curious—how did Her Highness deal with the matter?"

Ludwig met his master's inquisitive gaze with a smug smile. Before he could speak, however, Gilbert butted in. "Oh, I know! She got off the carriage and walked up, didn't she?"

That got a round of nods from the room.

"Very clever," said one of the younger commenters. "If the carriage rolled up, it'd ruin all that hard-grown wheat, but walking up would do minimal damage. That way, she displays appreciation for their welcome without wasting the fruits of their labor. It's the perfect compromise!"

Other members of similar age all voiced their agreement, evidently proud that they'd happened upon the correct answer.

Ludwig, however, shook his head. "No. Not the *perfect* compromise, at least, because that's only half of it. Her Highness walked up, yes, but she removed her shoes and did so barefoot."

"You can't be serious! Her bare feet?!"

"No way! This is the princess we're talking about!"

A round of amazed gasps rolled through what would soon be a throng of rabid Mia fans. Amidst their excited chatter, Ludwig huffed with self-satisfaction and continued his story.

Chapter 15: The Abyssal Depth of the Great Sage of the Empire

“And so, we come upon the climax of the Thanksharvest Festival...whereupon Her Highness treated the audience to a dance,” Ludwig expounded with the air of a storyteller recounting a great myth. He then quietly closed his eyes as he recalled the scene in his mind. “It was truly a breathtaking performance. The artistry... The symbolism... I could almost see the bond between Tearmoon and Perujin forming before my very eyes. I’d heard of Her Highness’s prowess at dance, but never could I have imagined the sheer *degree* of her brilliance... The experience of witnessing it in person... It bordered on the divine.”

He spoke with the kind of lyrical slur often employed by impassioned minstrels. Or rambling drunkards. Considering the amount of wine he’d sipped by this point, the latter might be more likely. Despite his apparent inebriation, Galv nodded vigorously at his words.

“Indeed. It’s said that dance reveals the depths of one’s soul. Clearly, at the bottom of Her Highness’s heart lies a desire to see peace and prosperity for all people. The beauty of her virtue was reflected in the beauty of her performance,” explained the wiseman, the soberness of his tone almost comically at odds with his pupil’s intoxication.

Nobody pointed out this discrepancy. Instead, the other members in the room all nodded solemnly, uttering remarks such as “well said” and “indeed.”

“Yes, that’s exactly it! It was a beauty that shone from the depths of her soul!” exclaimed Ludwig, jumping on the bandwagon of praise with the same eagerness Mia showed for wave-riding. Her knack for sensing momentum had perhaps rubbed off on her right hand. “And when she finished the dance, His Majesty King Yuhal formally declared that Perujin would forge a bond of trust with Her Highness.”

“But doesn’t that mean the Perujin king ended up stealing all of her

thunder?"

"No, the way I see it, Her Highness saw no need to contest any credit for the feat. She deliberately gave him the floor because she valued Perujin's trust far more," said Ludwig, shuddering as he recalled the spark of hope in the eyes of the gathered audience, their cheers of joy, his own wordless exhilaration...and most notably, the deep satisfaction he saw on Mia's face. It was an expression he'd remember for the rest of his life.

"But that's not all," he continued. "Her Highness was after something more. Something *bigger*."

"What? What more could there be?"

"We now enter the realm of inference, but it is my suspicion that..."

Ludwig explained his theory, put together based on a host of circumstantial evidence. He presented a grand vision of a border-spanning mutual aid network that would supply food to deprived regions throughout the continent. The scale and significance of this hyperbolized feat wowed the listeners. Fueled by the childlike wonder of Galv and a roomful of young, energized officials, the very air in the room buzzed with excitement.

"You can't be serious! Not only Forkroad, but even Shalloak Cornrogue? She managed to rope *him* into this?"

Those who'd interacted with the Merchant King before knew well the degree of his devotion to money. The astonishment on their faces was clear as day when they were told of Shalloak's metamorphosis. Never would they have imagined him to spare even a penny for charity, let alone dedicate himself so wholly to the task.

"It was like a great confluence of talent. Great minds from all walks of life gathered under her banner, rallied into a unified whole by the Bread-Cake Declaration," said Ludwig, downing another glass of wine—he'd lost count of how many he'd had—as he spoke. He was now slurring so lyrically he might as well have been singing.

Faced with the blatant intoxication of his pupil, Galv nodded vigorously once again.

"Indeed," said Galv. "It's said that there exist words which will move the hearts of many. Clearly, Her Highness's words possess this extraordinary power."

The sobriety of his tone called his own sobriety into question. The other members in the room (are they even worth mentioning at this point?)

nodded in the same approving fashion.

One man went so far as to rise from his seat. “Ludwig, this project of yours... I want in on it!”

The young officials in the room were capable, ambitious, and wanting. Endowed with gift but deprived of purpose, the vision presented to them by the Great Sage of the Empire (via Ludwig) of an organization that dwarfed all prior efforts in scale and ingenuity was infinitely captivating.

“Excellent. I was hoping you’d say that,” replied Ludwig. “The project is in need of some Tearmoon talent, and your help will be invaluable.”

The man’s enrollment was swiftly followed by many others. Ludwig promised to give them documents detailing his plan in due time.

“We also need some manpower on the wheat-breeding front, but every expert in the field had long lost hope in the empire and gone abroad...” said Galv with a grimace. “I’m trying to call them back, but the best in the business is currently overseas...”

Ludwig shook his head sympathetically. “Do not be too hard on yourself, master. We can but do our best. Even for us, it is a constant challenge to follow Her Highness’s thought process. Its speed and alacrity often catch us by surprise.”

That earned him a round of muttered agreement.

“I have to say though,” said a member in a contemplative tone, “the way Her Highness thinks, it’s almost as if she sees what’s coming... She’s so many steps ahead, it’s uncanny... Almost makes you want to wonder if she’s truly human...”

“And which do you think is scarier?” asked Gilbert. “If she’s not, or if she *is*. Personally, I’d say the latter.”

Another man laughed at him. “What are you talking about, man? It’d be way scarier if she had no idea what she was doing and this was literally a crazy chain of coincidences. Reality itself would have to be breaking down for that to happen.”

Gilbert glanced at him before shrugging. “Eh, I guess you’re right.”

The whole room shared a laugh and a sip of wine. Had they discovered the truth right then, they’d surely have all suffered a fatal choking on the gulp. For their sake, may such a day never come.

“...And that’s the gist of our current plans,” said Ludwig.

“Strengthen the base before expanding the faction, huh? Makes sense,” said Dion.

“Time plays no favorites though. Our enemies will grow stronger as well.”

“They will, and they sure as hell won’t wait until we’re ripe and ready. They’re gonna strike us when and where we’re weak.”

Ludwig adjusted his glasses. “That goes without saying. Nobles are conservative by nature. It’s been a while since that winter day when Her Highness donned imperial purple. It’s high time for the opposition to make a move.”

“Which means...the daughter notwithstanding, we should assume Duke Greenmoon is against the princess-to-empress idea?”

“If Her Highness doesn’t inherit the throne, it leaves open the possibility for a Greenmoon heir to do so. There are plenty of ways in which our interests run counter, and very few where they align. I can’t say for sure, but...the circumstances speak for themselves.” Ludwig folded his arms. “Then again, it’s also possible that he’s honestly just trying to find a good husband for his daughter. The heart of man is ever a mystery. At times, it seems endlessly deep, only for you to later realize it was but a shadow on the shallow floor.”

For a moment, it seemed as if he was about to grasp the truth. He came *this* close to seeing the trickery of light behind the abyssal depth of the Great Sage of the Empire. Then, the moment passed, and he chuckled.

“Whatever the case, our job right now is to protect Her Highness from all her enemies, be they Serpents, anti-empress factions, or whatever else lurking beyond our knowledge. That should be the focus of— Hm? What’s wrong?”

Ludwig looked up at Dion, who’d shot to his feet.

“Nothing much. Just heard something. Or someone,” he said, his hand reaching for the hilt at his waist. “And it’s getting closer.” He stepped off the carriage, but not before shrugging and adding, “Sounds like a small-fry though. Shame. Was hoping for some action.”

Chapter 16: Tour Guide Mia

"Hnnngh..."

Mia's disgruntled grumbling echoed inside her carriage. The problematic passage in the Chronicles had returned to the forefront of her mind, and it was messing with her mood.

"My, what's the matter, Miss Mia?"

She looked up to find a concerned Esmeralda. Behind her were Tiona, Citrina, and Bel, all of whom shared her expression.

"Oh, don't mind me. I just...didn't get much sleep last night, so I'm feeling a little drowsy."

Mia yawned. It was a genuine yawn. Last night had indeed been a sleepless one. After joining two of Greenmoon's luxury carriages to create one luscious chamber, all the girls—that's Mia, Esmeralda, Tiona, Bel, Citrina, and even the attendants Anne, Liora, and Nina—got together for the mother of all girl-talks, an all-night no-holds-barred chat fest supreme. Giggles and gasps filled the night as the conversation made its way from Liora's spooky forest stories to Tiona's tales of ghost towns before Citrina took the cake.

What was said, Mia did not know, because her mind had refused to commit such frightening words to memory. Unlike Bel, who munched on snacks while listening with intense fascination, Mia was legitimately terrified. Normally, she'd latch onto Anne for comfort, but her trusty maid had been appropriated by Nina, and the pair was chatting up a storm. Unwilling to butt in, Mia was left to her own devices. Her own sleepless devices.

The drowsiness was, in fact, real. The lie was in correlation to her dour mood.

According to the book, the battle with the caravan-pillaging bandits happened just a little north of here, and that's where he got killed.

Sion's grisly fate was the cause of her gloom. Their trip had been mostly smooth so far, but...

This broken carriage certainly wasn't part of the plan. Even if we leave soon, we probably won't make it in time if we stay on the current course. Ugh, I guess I'll have to skip the trip to the nearby town to look for tasty souvenirs...

Like a seasoned tour guide, the gears in her mind spun furiously to preserve as much of the schedule as possible while compensating for this unexpected delay. Sadly, she determined that there was no time for her shopping detour. Just as she was about to accept this terribly discouraging fact, there was a knock on the door of her carriage.

"Excuse me, Princess Mia. May I have a moment of your time?"

At her bidding, the captain of Sunkland's escort entered. He and his squad had been sent here by Count Lampron, who'd invited Esmeralda to this event.

Sunkland's standing military could largely be divided into two categories. One was the royal army, which constituted half of its numbers. The other half was made up of private armies belonging to regional nobility. The squad tasked with escorting Esmeralda was drawn from a private army owned by Count Lampron.

Mia smiled politely at the bowing soldier. "Thank you for your diligent service, Captain. The protection you and your men offer is very much appreciated."

The captain blinked, taken aback by the fact she opened with gratitude instead of irritation.

"Well? Go ahead," she prompted, head tilting quizzically at his surprise. "I believe you wished to speak to me about something?"

Mia, you see, had completely forgotten about how she'd gotten herself into Esmeralda's retinue. She'd played the "selfish princess" card and shown up unannounced, declaring that "I, Mia Luna Tearmoon, will be accompanying Esmeralda as her friend and that's that!" The this-is-the-worst-day-of-my-life look on the captain's face at the time had been a sight she wouldn't forget easily. Or so she'd thought. Turns out, she forgot it pretty easily. Flexible mind, Mia's forte, et cetera, et cetera.

"I... Uh, I'd like to report that a merchant caravan just passed by not far from here."

"Huh. A merchant caravan, you say?"

"Yes. They seem to be heading toward the capital. I am aware that you

had plans to do some shopping. If it pleases you, I can ask the merchants to wait, and you can perhaps take a look at their goods yourself. It...will be some time before we can depart again."

"I see. That's not a bad idea. I was getting a little bored here anyway."

Mia didn't mind where she bought her supply of local Sunkland specialties, so long as she got them. If the caravan sufficed, then that would be perfectly fine. Sunkland was also known for its silverwork, so browsing the merchants' wares should prove a fun pastime for the rest of the girls who were also twiddling their thumbs in their respective carriages.

They could be bandits disguised as merchants, of course...

The possibility was not lost on her, but she wasn't worried—she had Dion Alaia with her, after all. Within a foot of her would stand a man who could split metal without breaking a sweat. If anyone wanted to try swinging a sword around him, she'd wish them good luck. Because they'd need it, and it still wouldn't be enough. Judging by the fact that the Sunkland captain was the one reporting to her, Dion was probably keeping an eye on the merchants himself.

I'll also have Ludwig with me... It literally can't get any safer than this.

"What do you think, Esmeralda?" she asked, not forgetting to consult the event's main guest for her opinion.

"I think it's a great idea! Let's go see what goodies Sunkland has for sale!" Esmeralda was fully on board.

"Good. What perfect timing this is. Let's go take a look, then."

What Mia *did* forget was the part in the passage about Sion's death describing what the bandits who killed him had been attacking in the first place...

Chapter 17: Princess Mia...Talks Mushrooms!

“It is our utmost honor to have our humble caravan graced by the presence of Your Highness, Princess Mia.”

“My, how terribly nice of you to say that,” said a smiling Mia as she curtsied at the meekly hunched merchant. “I’m glad we ran into pilgrimage merchants here.”

Pilgrimage merchants were traveling merchants whose business revolved around Pilgrimage Road. Their routes spanned the entirety of the traffic artery and took them from nation to nation. In addition to their vital function as distributors of goods throughout the continent, they also supplied pilgrims with necessities during their journeys, making them well-respected by all nations.

“Would you mind telling us where you’re currently headed?”

“No, no, not at all,” said Mia. “We are currently heading for the capital city of Sunkland.”

“Oh, you too? What a coincidence. So are we.” Though the man smiled at her comment, the expression appeared strained. “A good coincidence, and we are all glad for it. There is apparently no shortage of bad coincidences here.”

“My, what exactly do you mean?”

“We heard that bandits have been roaming in this area, but none of us could afford to change our route significantly. We were just in the middle of discussing what to do if we ran into some when your soldiers arrived.”

The caravan was a modest one consisting of three horse wagons, each belonging to one of three separate merchants. They were not acquainted with each other and were only traveling together because their destination happened to be the same. Needless to say, none of them had the money to hire proper guards.

“Sunkland is known to be a pretty safe kingdom, but no place is

completely free from bandits...” said the merchant with a sigh.

“Hm, I see...”

These bandits they’re talking about, Mia thought with pursed lips, *maybe they’re the ones who’re going to kill Sion...*

“Uh, is something the matter?”

“Huh? Oh, no, I was just thinking that since we’ve been blessed with this good coincidence, we might as well take advantage of it. Would you mind if we took a look at your goods?”

“By all means. We have a host of high-quality products, so take your time browsing.”

The merchant immediately switched to a business smile and rubbed his hands together.

“Oh, Miss Mia, look at this cloth! The quality is excellent.”

“My, you’re right. The texture is so nice.”

Whereas Esmeralda all but squealed with glee, Mia responded with a serene, princessly smile. Mia, you see, could be princess-like when she wanted. Heck, she wasn’t just princess-like; she *was* a princess. A real, bona fide princess of the Tearmoon Empire! All she had to do was be herself, and her natural princessness would spill out of her like an overflowing dam.

For some reason, though, it wasn’t. Maybe the dam was dry or something.

Hm, everyone seems to be enjoying themselves. Good.

Tiona and Citrina were happily browsing the goods. Bel, who trailed her friend, seemed to be having a blast too. Seeing that her friends were all reveling in the shopping opportunity, Mia nodded contentedly to herself before her attention was promptly drawn to a curious item on display.

“My, these mushrooms are dried purple shiitake, aren’t they? They grow really far from here, so I’d given up all hope of finding them on this trip. What a pleasant surprise!”

Purple shiitake were found in the eastern regions of Sunkland. Drying added a richness to their flavor, and they were popular among the affluent class, making their name especially appropriate—it described the appearance of both the mushroom and the people who consumed it.

“Oh, and these must be matsutake mushrooms!” A green fungus elicited a second cry of delight. “I believe they produce a very unique aroma when

decocted into tea."

"Wow, Your Highness is very well-informed."

"Well, yes, I suppose I do know a thing or two about mushrooms," she said, glad to have a chance to show off the fruits of her studying. "And I believe *these* are shimeji mushrooms. They look delicious."

She was considering taking some home with her for Abel to try later when the merchant let out an amused chuckle. "Ha ha, close, but no cigar on this one. These are *red* shimejis. They're poisonous."

Mia the walking punchline struck again! She'd been *this* close to poisoning her sweetheart. If Abel had some sort of sixth sense, he'd probably have felt a chill just then.

"P-Poisonous?! What in the moons are you doing selling poisonous mushrooms?!" she exclaimed.

Citrina promptly slid in with an explanation.

"The poison in these mushrooms can be removed through boiling. I hear they're eaten as a delicacy in some regions. Also, their poison is known as shadowbane, which can be used as an antidote to neutralize a different toxin known as lightbane. With that said, the shadowbane of a red shimeji is very potent, so there aren't many toxins strong enough to require them as a counter."

"Hey, looks like we have another mushroom expert here. You're right. It's pretty rare to see these being used as antidotes these days," the merchant added. "They were a lot more popular in the old days when people still used poisonous arrows for hunting. Back then, you'd sometimes poke yourself in the finger by accident, or get an arrow's poison in your mouth, and you'd use this as an antidote."

"Wow, Rina, you know so much!" Bel exclaimed.

"Not *that* much," replied Citrina, though she was clearly pleased by the compliment.

Meanwhile, Mia, having been thoroughly upstaged...

"Huuuh... Is that so...?"

...Was, in fact, not upset! Rather, she nodded with earnest fascination. That's right, for Mushroom Empress Mia, anyone who could impart new mushroom wisdom to her was a mentor worth her respect and attention.

As expected of Rina. She truly is a fountain of knowledge, thought Mia, her arms crossed. "In that case, maybe I should buy some..."

Unfortunately, gaining new mushroom wisdom did not seem to prevent her from having very bad ideas!

I mean, it's apparently a delicacy. I can't not *try it. Plus, I have Rina with me, and she's an expert, so I shouldn't have to worry about preparing it properly...*

Her receptiveness to new experiences was certainly commendable, but it was still a very bad idea.

"Rina, are you able to handle these properly?" she asked, giving the girl a hungry look that left no doubt as to what she meant by "handle."

Citrina nodded, her expression serious. "Yes, Your Highness. I believe I can."

After purchasing a supply, Mia promptly sauntered off to look at other goods. Acquiring a new delicacy put her in an excellent mood, and she beamed as she browsed. Soon after, it was decided that they'd travel together with her newly befriended merchants toward their mutual destination.

Chapter 18: Mia the Great Sage and Her Great-Sagely Strategizing

Oho ho, everything worked out perfectly.

Prior to this trip, Mia had actually done some proper planning and put together a pretty intricate schedule that would place Dion in the right place at the right time to solve her don't-let-Sion-die problem. To her delight, everything was—aside from a minor hiccup with the broken carriage wheel—more or less going according to plan. The carriage's delay required her to cancel her en route shopping trip, but that was effectively remedied by the accompanying merchant caravan.

Now, the final part of her plan was drawing close.

All right... There's one last problem to solve, and it's how I'm supposed to get Dion to where Sion is. I'll need an excuse to send him in... Maybe I can have him head off first and claim that he's scouting the area...

Mia's goal was to confer upon Sion the protection of Dion Alaia. It was definitely not to protect the prince herself. No, that would require her to put herself in danger, which was just about the last thing she wanted to do. Besides, even if she did go, she probably wouldn't be much use anyway.

Mia, you see, considered herself more of the mastermind type.

Yes... I am the Great Sage, after all. And what do Great Sages do? They strategize. They pull the strings from behind the scenes and manipulate things from the shadows... Oho ho...

With everything going her way, Mia felt like she was on the top of the world. Unfortunately, being on the top of the world made it hard to notice more terrestrial concerns, and there was a very significant concern that escaped her attention—what goes up must come down.

Mia was up real high right now. All that remained was the fall.

It came with theatrical timing, for shouting was promptly heard up ahead.

"Bandits! Bandits are attacking!"

And that spelled the end of Mia's Great-Sagely strategizing.

"...Huh?"

The control she felt over the situation proved woefully short-lived.

"Bandits, eh?" Dion calmly watched the approaching figures split up to surround Mia's procession. "A little too well-trained for bandits, I think..." The horseback brigands rode with the precision of cavalrymen— No, better than calvarymen. The way they kept formation put many trained soldiers to shame. "Surround first, ask questions later. A good tactic done well. Bravo to the bandits."

"Captain Dion!"

"Hey, that's '*Not* Captain' to you," he quipped at the shouting guard. The man was one of his old subordinates. "Not in the squad anymore."

The guard saluted his acknowledgment.

"Anyway, what's the guard situation?" Dion asked.

"The caravan's guards are... Well, they're exactly as you'd expect. Greenmoon's ain't much better. Count Lampron's men look like they might be worth their salt, though. Should be able to keep up with us, at least."

"Huh. Gotcha. That should be enough to deal with regular bandits... Too bad we're—"

Before he got to utter "not dealing with regular ones," the bandits dismounted and sent their horses circling behind to block off the means of escape.

"Should we head out and soften 'em up first?"

"Hmm, maybe, if Vanos were here... But then again, the body count might get a little too high... Tough decision."

"Huh. That's rare. Honestly, I half-expected you to be out there chopping people up by yourself already, Captain."

Dion pointedly eyed his surprised subordinate, who shrugged and saluted again. "Look, even I gotta use this sometimes," he said, tapping his head. "Think about it. Why would the princess want me here?"

To the casual eye, "dealing with situations like this one" might seem a fine reason. "In case the wolfmaster shows up" might also be a valid answer. But...

Our princess has a bit of an aversion to people dying. If that's her reason for getting me to tag along...

He recalled her masterful resolution of the revolution in Reno without spilling a single drop of blood.

“Suppose she’s expecting the same of me this time...and suppose there’s some connection between ol’ wolfie and these bandits...” He arrived at a conclusion that made him shake his head. “Bloody hell...”

“Orders, Captain? We’re ready for action.”

“Action, huh... Hey, what’s that saying again? Something about how the best way to win is with sword undrawn? Let’s put that saying to the test. Come on!” Dion charged out. Before the rest of the Princess Guard could follow, he shouted at them. “The rest of you are on princess duty! If a man with wolves shows up, gimme a holler, pronto, and keep the girl safe. I want you all to guard her with your lives, *and* die trying! Then guard her some more after!”

The guards whistled and cheered.

“Aw, yeah! That’s the captain I know!”

“Ruthless to his own! Love to see it!”

The whoops of his men like the twang of a bowstring, Dion shot toward the bandits with the force of a loosed arrow. Sitting high atop his mount, he drew his sword.

“Put down your weapons!” shouted one of the bandits. “Give us your goods, and you’ll leave with your lives!”

The same bandit promptly let loose an arrow of his own. It pierced the air with a sharp shriek. Dion, eyes locked on the missile, grinned at the prospect of battle.

“Aw, hell if I ain’t a sucker for a good fight. I’ll never get enough of this!”

His sword flashed from side to side. With a shrill *shiiick*, two halves of a shaft fell to the ground at his sides.

“And you, my good bandit friends, should absolutely *not* put down your weapons! Keep shooting those arrows, and you might have a chance of leaving with your lives! You’ve got until I’m within head-lopping distance, so better hurry up!”

His provocation was met with silence.

And a deadly volley of arrows.

Chapter 19: As the Sword of the Great Sage of the Empire

"Well well well, not bad at all."

Dion whistled at the approaching volley of arrows. They flew as a unified whole, their aim dead-on. He nodded with satisfaction. Granted, he was purposefully keeping his horse at a constant speed to make himself an easier target, but that was nitpicking. These were undoubtedly expert archers. Not a single one of their shots would even hit his horse, never mind fly wide.

"Thanks for shooting 'em all at my face. Makes it easier to deal with."

He deliberately stood his ground, making no attempt to dodge. His blade flashed again, this time drawing a trickier pattern in even shorter time. With an accuracy that bordered on prescience, he sent all the arrows bouncing away as if they'd hit a force field. Safe behind his shield made of pure skill, he burst through the volley unharmed.

"Gotta give it to them, though. This kind of accuracy while on horseback is bloody impressive. I'm willing to bet it's beyond even the imperial cavalry."

Horseback archery is a supremely difficult skill. Military archers in the Tearmoon military were either snipers, who planted themselves on firm ground to shoot accurately over long distances, or formation bowmen whose diminished accuracy was offset by sheer numbers.

"These guys shoot like snipers. *While riding*. Bandits, my ass. These are pros— Whoa!"

Dion's left hand blurred. When it came to a stop beside his neck, it held an arrow in its grip.

"A delayed shot. Damn, these guys aren't just snipers—they got tricks up their sleeves." His eyes narrowed at the arrow tip, which was coated with a slimy, sap-like substance. "And they use poison. Probably fair to assume a scratch is fatal. The average soldiers would probably have died

thrice already... But this definitely makes things easier for me."

He threw his head back and cackled. Then, after fixing the bandits with an intimidating stare, he threw his captured arrow up in the air.

"My name is Dion Alaia! Sword of the Great Sage of the Empire, Her Highness Princess Mia! Spare your arrows! They'll do you no good! If you want my life, come trade with your own!" he roared as he swung at the falling missile.

Three metallic streaks crossed its shaft. Four severed pieces fell to the ground. He made a show of looking pointedly at each of them before turning his attention back to his foes.

"Those who don't fear meeting the same end, come at me two— No, make it three at a time. I like taking lives, you see, but not wasting 'em. I want you to put up a good fight for me before you croak, y'hear?"

He glared at the bandits, acutely aware that the mention of his name had sent a ripple of unrest through their ranks. It was very subtle, but it didn't escape his notice.

Looks like they've heard of me... I must've been right about them being in cahoots with ol' wolfie. Or... Hah, maybe I've gained celebrity status in Sunkland too.

He had two reasons for revealing his identity: The first was to discern whether the bandits were connected with the wolfmaster. The second was to intimidate his opponents.

If I were ol' wolfie, I'd definitely tell them to stay the hell away from a guy called Dion Alaia. Unless they've got some serious confidence in their swordplay, of course.

Either way, just hearing his name should give them pause. Maybe even convince them to back off.

"Not that I'm afraid of crossing swords, of course," he muttered. "Hell, I can probably wipe the floor with them."

As a soldier, that would be an impeccable result. Eliminating, routing, or even forcing the opponent to retreat was a victory for those charging into battle. As a commander, however, that was no longer optimal, because at the conclusion of a battle, victorious soldiers were also tired soldiers. Stamina could be recovered. Wounds healed. But death was permanent. Maiming, likewise. Every fight took a toll of attrition, extracted in the form of soldiers. Valuable soldiers who had both trained and been trained with

care and attention—their loss was never trivial. Therefore, for an army, the decision to engage in battle was, by its very nature, already a suboptimal option.

To win with sword undrawn, huh...? Bah, who'd have thought there'd be a day when I'm thinking about this stuff. At this rate, I really might turn into a commander. Better start working on the pot belly. Gotta look the part, after all.

As an individual soldier, he needed to focus only on his own prowess in combat. So long as he defeated his foes, all was well. As the sword of the Great Sage of the Empire, however, that was no longer sufficient.

"Anyhow, this is about as much as I can do... If they still decide to come, then we're definitely gonna be winning with sword drawn. And I'm totally fine with that."

The bandits showed no signs of retreating. Nor attacking, for that matter. They continued to spread out and slowly surround the caravan. Dion...didn't blame them, actually.

"They probably figured they have an advantage if we have to protect the carriages while we fight. Or maybe they think they've got a chance of takin' me down while I'm out here by myself. Dion Alaia's head would definitely be a useful trophy for them. Makes sense. The other possibility is...their person of interest is actually in one of the other carriages in the back..."

Whatever their reasoning, they'd still be choosing death.

"Ol' wolfie would've been long gone by now. That guy knows when to back off. Oh, but I guess if he showed up, I'd also be in there slicing up a storm by now. A fight with him's way too fun to pass up."

Just as he figured he'd wait a little longer to see how things played out, the situation abruptly changed.

"The royal army is here!"

Someone let out a shrill cry. Heads turned at once toward the distance, where a cloud of dust signified the presence of large numbers of feet. The deep, steady rumble of army hooves could be heard. Soon, the unmistakable shape of a cavalry line came into view.

The bandits were not foolhardy enough to try facing off against the Empire's Finest and the royal army at the same time. Dion immediately perceived the shift in their attitude. There would be no fighting today. Shortly after, the heads of their horses turned in unison. With the same

coordinated precision as their arrival, they swiftly departed. Dion couldn't help but whistle at the sight.

"What a show. Gotta hand it to them. There's probably no point trying to chase them... Oh?"

"Sir Dion!"

He looked in the direction of the voice to find a boy he knew at the head of the royal army.

"Prince Sion's personally leading the cavalry, huh. Very gallant. Givin' Prince Abel a run for his money. Now, the question of the hour is... Was even this all part of the princess's plan?" he murmured, sheathing his blade.

Chapter 20: Princess Mia...Is Put in an Extremely Forgiving Mood

“Bandits! Bandits are attacking!”

The second she heard the urgent cry from outside, Mia realized she’d made a grave mistake.

Oh, moons. I messed up. I was supposed to be a bystander, but I’ve made myself a participant.

The only thing keeping her from having a nervous breakdown on the spot was the knowledge that she had Dion Alaia, and the enemy did not. The Empire’s Finest, and possibly the Continent’s Scariest, was here—and on her side to boot! As a veteran hunted-by-Dion-er, Mia knew all too well how important the latter point was.

We should be fine. It’s just bandits. Bandits can’t be that bad...

That was what she told herself. And it worked! For once, she didn’t go full chicken at the first whiff of trouble.

I mean, Sion and his big head might let his guard down around bandits and end up getting himself killed, but not me. I never let my guard down! Oho ho! By pure coincidence, I might have charged right into the center of a very dangerous situation, but it’s fine!

Despite her precarious position, Mia remained supremely confident. She’d done her homework. She was fully prepared to deal with all eventualities on this trip. Except the current one. But everything else was going swimmingly. Not to mention she’d managed to buy some rare delicacies, and that hadn’t even been on the itinerary. All she had to do was patch this tiny bandit-sized hole in her plan, and she’d be good to go. It couldn’t be *that* hard.

“Miss Mia...”

She heard her name whispered in a voice thick with unease. Turning toward it, she found a nervous Esmeralda all but clinging to Nina. It was, to be honest, quite the pitiful sight.

Sweet moons, I know she's scared, but hugging her maid like that? How terribly childish.

Mia glanced at Anne. Her own maid was visibly anxious but showed no signs of losing her cool.

I know I'd *never behave like that, no matter how scared I was. I sometimes hug Anne, yes, but that's to help calm her down. I do it for* her*, never for myself,* she thought, shaking her head. *Honestly, Esmeralda can be such a scaredy-cat sometimes. No self-respecting lady should ever allow herself to be seen doing something so embarrassing.*

"It's all right, Esmeralda," Mia said, smiling reassuringly. "Bandits like these won't give my guards any trouble. It'll be over before you know it." *I do wonder, though... What if I hadn't been here? What would have happened?*

The pilgrimage merchants would probably have overtaken Esmeralda's group and gone on ahead, where they would have been attacked by the bandits. During that battle, Sion would have lost his life.

But wait. Esmeralda's travel schedule changed from before. I fixed it myself. We're a couple of days off from the original one...

Therefore, the bandits shouldn't have shown up with such perfect timing. Then again, they *were* still on the same route, so...

Hm, something about this bugs me. Esmeralda's from one of the Four Houses, so I can see why people might go after her...

She frowned in concentration, trying to derive the implications of this line of thought.

Was Sion somehow forced to join the bandit-hunting expedition? Or would things have turned out differently had he not gotten involved? I was under the impression that this whole bandit situation is all part of a conspiracy to assassinate Sion, but maybe they're actually trying to get their hands on Esmeralda...

The only information in the Chronicles was that Sion had died. There was no way to uncover the sequence of events that had led to this result.

I get the feeling that whatever's going on behind the scenes, it's pretty complicated— Huh?

A sudden weight on her chest pulled her out of her thoughts. Esmeralda had suddenly thrown herself onto Mia.

"Wha— Esmeralda? What are you doing?"

She had to wrestle Esmeralda a little to loosen her tight embrace. Only then did she find tears in her friend's eyes. This did not, however, stop Esmeralda from putting on the least-convincing brave front in recent memory.

"M-Miss Mia, just so you know... I-If you're scared, it's okay! I-I'm here for you! If anything happens, I-I-I'll protect you with my life. I swear on m-my honor as an Etoiline. My soldiers too. I'm sure they'll risk their lives for us. Probably... S-So don't wor— Eeek!"

Esmeralda all but jumped as the carriage creaked before settling—poorly, but by God she was trying—back into her "you can count on me" persona. Mia could almost see the two halves of her, the big sister and the terrified damsel, both vying for control.

What if, during the revolution, Esmeralda had come with me? If we'd tried to run away together? Would it have felt a little like this? wondered Mia.

In the previous timeline, the Greenmoons had preemptively fled overseas, dashing all hope of a paired flight by the two. Left to her own devices, fear and doubt had been Mia's only companions during her ill-fated escape. Had she been accompanied by a flustered Esmeralda, it might have actually helped calm her nerves...

Oh, well. I guess this isn't too bad. I mean, she's totally invading my personal space, but I'm sure she's pretty scared, so I'll forgive this offense.

The circumstances had put Mia in an extremely forgiving mood. Not something you see every day.

While the members of Mia's carriage were busy engaging in their "Are you scared? Because I'm not scared" antics, the mood in a neighboring vehicle was quite different. Tiona and Liora, the resident weight-pullers in battle (by Mia's measure), were checking their bows and arrows.

"Liora, can you hit them from inside here?"

"Yes, I can... No problem." Liora smiled and nodded with confidence.

"Good. If it comes to it, I'll help too. I think I can probably land my shots, at least..."

"Aim for the body... They might be wearing armor... But it's easier to hit when you're far... And if it goes through their throat...then lucky you."

Then, in the next carriage over, the mood was different yet again. Its passengers were engaged in conversation of a less martial nature.

"Wow! Are you telling me I'll get to see General Dion in battle?"

"Hm? You know who Dion is?" asked a puzzled Citrina.

Bel excitedly threw her hands up in the air. "Of course I do! He's my hero! He did so much for me!"

"He did? Huh. Well...I'm glad for you then, I guess."

Though not entirely convinced by Bel's answer, Citrina shook her head and the thought out of her mind. What Bel had said wasn't lining up with her prior research, but that didn't matter. The veracity of those reports could wait. Right now, her dear friend was about to talk about her past, and that was far more important. Between investigating a potential intelligence failure and enjoying conversation with her friend, Citrina chose the latter. Her value system had completed its transformation into that of a true noble girl!

"So, are you into strong men like him, Bel?"

“Huh? Strong men? Hmm... If I had to choose, then yes, I suppose. I like strong, cool-looking people.”

“Fascinating. What kind of people are strong and cool-looking, exactly? You mean like Prince Abel?”

“Ehee hee, just between the two of us, I’m more into people like the Libra— I mean Prince Sion.”

...May the soul of Grandpa Abel rest in peace.

Chapter 21: Mia's Trust Does Not Waver!

Some time after the initial warning of oncoming bandits, the carriages suddenly drew to a stop. Esmeralda gulped and held her breath. Mia, meanwhile, let hers out, figuring it was finally over.

It's been a while since Dion charged off by himself, after all. We're probably done. But ugh... I'm not looking forward to peeking outside. It must be a sea of blood out there!

After the arrow panels were lowered for their protection, Mia and co. had been blinded to the goings-on outside. Mia's unwavering trust in Dion, however, convinced her that what lay outside was undoubtedly a scene straight out of hell. The average gang of bandits couldn't possibly stand a chance against the one-man slaughter machine that was Dion Alaia. It wouldn't even have been a fight. It was pure, brutal butchery, carried out with methodical precision. There was no doubt in her mind. Again, Mia's trust in Dion did not waver.

Eventually, there was a knock on the door.

"Excuse me, Your Highness."

The voice belonged to none other than the man himself, Dion Alaia.

Feeling extremely hesitant to remove the only barrier between her eyes and the scene outside, Mia glanced at Nina, who sat near the door. The maid wore the same concerned expression as Esmeralda.

Mia gave them an encouraging smile. "Don't worry. It's Dion. Go ahead and let him in."

After a moment's hesitation, Nina opened the carriage door. As predicted, the man who stepped in was indeed the Empire's Finest. Mia, who'd kept her eyes firmly planted on the wall opposite the door, slowly inhaled, steeled her nerves, and turned her gaze toward him. As he entered her view, she found him covered head-to-toe in...nothing. Both he and his armor were absolutely spotless.

My, so not only did he massacre all those bandits, he did it without letting a drop of blood touch him. How terrifyingly impressive as always!

Mia's trust in Dion was absolutely unshakable!

"Hello, Dion. I assume you've successfully *dealt with* the situation, then. Tell me, how many vict—er, casualties were there?" she asked, expecting there to be a mess of carcasses behind him. Bodies and limbs of horses and riders alike were probably splayed across the ground. Sundered pieces of armor likely still held severed fragments of their wearer. Whatever was out there, it would definitely haunt her dreams for days to come.

Dion answered in the most casual tone. "Zero. Both for us and them. A timely intervention by the Sunkland army allowed us to avoid a battle."

"A-An intervention? D-Don't tell me you left the Sunkland army to fight the bandits and pulled our own people out?" That would be a disaster. Mia almost leapt to her feet at the thought.

"Unfortunately, we didn't even get the chance. The bandits just turned tail and went. I watched them go myself," said someone outside.

Recognizing the voice, Mia jerked her head forward to peek behind Dion. "My... Sion..."

The boy gave her his usual composed smile.

"Moons, you're safe. What a relief." Just to make sure, she quickly shuffled off the carriage and walked over.

"Ha ha ha, honestly, what did you expect? They're just bandits. This kind of thing happens all the time. It's no problem." He said it with such nonchalance, such *amusement*, as if the sheer trifling nature of the encounter made her concern comical, that Mia almost wanted to slap him right then and there.

"Even if they are just bandits, *Prince Sion*," she said, her cheeks puffed indignantly, "you can't be riding out to fight them yourself. Think about your position! What if something happened to you?"

Farther behind them, Keithwood nodded so hard he might have sprained a neck muscle.

Sion, meanwhile, simply chuckled. "Thank you for your advice. I'll try my best to do as you say."

Ever the gentleman, Sion refrained from articulating the second half of the sentence: "rather than as you do." Still, he couldn't resist giving her a questioning "et tu" look.

“Now, if we’re all done judging me, I’d like to mention that it’s a great pleasure to see you again,” said Sion, nodding at Mia, then Esmeralda. “It’s been far too long. I’ve missed you all.”

Esmeralda all but melted at his charming smile. “My, what a pleasant coincidence it is to see you here, Prince Sion!”

What lingering tension there had been from the bandits evaporated immediately, replaced by fiery excitement at the appearance of her favorite thing—handsome young men.

Moons, she’s such a simple person, Mia thought. *One minute, she could be shaking in her shoes, and the next...* She shook her head. *Honestly, she can be such a handful sometimes. It’s almost embarrassing. As a young lady of noble birth, she should really carry herself with more dignity...*

Just as she was about to roll her eyes at her friend’s behavior, a tiny form burst out of a nearby carriage.

“Prince Sion! I missed you so much! Are you okay?!” Bel dashed up to him, grinning from cheek to rosy cheek. She clearly brimmed with the same energy as Esmeralda, which caused Mia to press a palm to her face.

Bel, Bel, Bel... Who did you get that side of you from?

Soon, Citrina, Tiona, and Liora joined them.

“Tiona, you too?” asked Sion, surprised by the sizable assembly of noble girls. “What brings so many of you to Sunkland?”

“Well, uh... We’re here as a part of Miss Esmeralda’s retinue. I believe she’s going to discuss a marriage proposal with the eldest son of one of your Dukes.”

“The eldest son of a Duke?” Sion frowned. “That’s odd. We only have so many eldest sons of Dukes, and all those who are of marrying age are...well, already married.”

“My, that *is* odd,” said Esmeralda, sharing his surprise. “I was told by my father that it’s a promising young individual who might eventually claim a title even more prestigious than Duke.”

“More prestigious than Duke? And eventually, at that?” Sion’s frown deepened. “Would you happen to know who brought up the idea of this marriage proposal in the first place?”

“I think it’s...Count Lampron? That’s what I heard from father, anyway...” The way her voice faded to a mumble suggested she hadn’t been told much of the details, which wasn’t particularly surprising. Marriages

between nobles were matters of national interest, meant to establish bonds between notable families. There were cases in which the first time the bride and groom met was on the day of the ceremony. With that said...

We should at least know which family the potential groom is from... They must have told us that much, at least.

Mia eyed Esmeralda, who shuffled her feet uncomfortably and said, "I-It's not my fault! We're going to turn them down anyway, so why does it matter who they are? Besides, what if the person's actually a really good choice? I wouldn't be able to turn them down if I knew that beforehand!"

In other words, having preemptively decided to reject the proposal outright, Esmeralda had paid no attention to what her father had told her.

"By the way, might this Count Lampron be, you know, someone whose statements should be taken with a grain of salt?" asked Mia.

"No, I wouldn't say that. The Lamprons are an old, prestigious family. The count himself is admittedly a bit of a self-righteous individual, but I doubt he'd abuse the honor of his house in that fashion..." Sion folded his arms with a *hmm*. "Well, this is a mystery that will solve itself in due time, so let us focus on more pressing matters. It seems like you have no need for additional protection right now, so I'll take my men to pursue the bandits —"

"N-No! You can't!" Mia blurted out before hastily correcting herself. "Uh, I mean, we definitely need additional protection, so you, Sion, are going to accompany us to the capital!"

She all but panicked at Sion's mention of leaving. If they parted ways here, he might get himself killed in another battle with the bandits. That would defeat the purpose of this whole trip. She *needed* him to come with her, and if she had to twist his arm a little, then so be it.

"Huh? But you seem—"

"Is this not *your* kingdom, Sion? And am I not a guest here? Are you fine with me, *a guest from Tearmoon*, being exposed to danger?"

Sion blinked a few times at her. "I...suppose you have a point. Fair enough. In that case, allow me to escort you to Count Lampron's residence in the capital."

He flashed her a warm smile, which promptly made the guard captain's blood run cold. "A-A Duke's daughter, a princess...and now Prince Sion?"

Only a single person noticed the captain's paling complexion. It was

Keithwood, Sion’s longtime attendant and victim, who quietly murmured a prayer of sympathy.

Chapter 22: Love Withered

First loves are doomed to wither.

Such is the prevailing truth, and truer still among nobles. This, therefore, is not an extraordinary story. It is not even a rare one. It is simply a story, one among a hundred, of a blossoming love withered by the uncaring tide of history.

The first time Tiona Rudolvon met Sion Sol Sunkland was at Saint-Noel Academy. She'd just arrived at the academy with her attendant, Liora, and a flock of noble girls had promptly surrounded them to amuse themselves at their expense. Sion had then shown up and, like the fabled knight in shining armor, rescued her from her plight. He'd offered his hand, both material and metaphor, and she'd taken it. Led by him, they'd toured the island. The experience had, for her, felt like nothing short of salvation.

He'd come to her aid again during the welcome party for new students, and time and again afterward. His gallant, timely appearances etched themselves into her heart and, perhaps, made it all but inevitable that she'd fall for him.

Every brush of her hand against his would send her heart aflutter. His gaze, pure like crystal, never failed to redden her cheeks. He was, almost certainly, her first love.

Sion was a fine boy with an even finer smile. Kind, noble, and unfailingly genuine, he was the very definition of virtuous royalty. As a prince, he recognized the privilege and duty that was his power. He held himself to the highest of standards, believing that he both could and should conduct himself rightly. He became...her *hero*. And in doing so, made the faults of her own nation's nobles all the more apparent.

Over time, a set of beliefs began to take shape in her, which were reinforced by her later acquaintance with Rafina Orca Belluga. As a noble, she aspired to strength, but a righteous strength. It was an admirable pursuit, virtuous in origin, and her budding ideals were immediately put to the test

by the great famine that assailed the continent.

Rampant plague, economic collapse, popular revolt, and ultimately...revolution.

The heralds of upheaval came for her, and she couldn't help but heed their call. The death of her father by the blade of intrigue compelled her forward, and she threw herself into the tide of change, her fear dulled by the presence of those at her side.

Sion Sol Sunkland shared her fury. He overthrew the imperial family, rotten to its core. He purged the empire of its prominent nobility. He toiled day and night to build a new nation that would serve the people. What he did to Tearmoon—*for* Tearmoon—was, to her, right and just.

But when? When did it all start to change? Watching him at his side, she felt a strange...distance. The Sion she'd known was not the Sion she knew. And she understood why. The balm of justice ill-healed a wound of the heart. The execution of their former classmate, Princess Mia, left his soul scarred.

Sion was strong, and he strove to be strong. His strength forced him to hide his pain before his vassals. Perhaps even masked it from himself. He did not—could not—admit that he was hurt. But Tiona knew. She knew all too well.

Because he was her hero. Because she looked up to him. Because...she'd fallen for him long, long ago.

"He's hurt... I have to help him..."

Over and over she'd tell herself so. Never once did she muster the courage to act. Sion was the lofty prince of the mighty Kingdom of Sunkland. She, a relative nobody. He was out of her league. That was a self-evident fact. Her role as a leader of the revolution and her involvement in the political affairs of Tearmoon did notable feats, yes, but they did not make her his match.

But when all is said, those were but excuses. The truest, most cardinal reason for her hesitancy was her knowledge that Sion had killed Mia *for her*. The assassination of Tiona's father had been carried out by the pro-emperor faction. To right this injustice, he'd drawn his sword and warred, risking life and limb. That war had left him with an injury—one he'd suffered fighting *for her*. What business did she, the very cause of his wound, have trying to heal him? How could she, even? Was she so craven,

so cruel, as to seek solace by scratching at his yet-aching scar? How many times had he seen her face, only to remember Mia's, bloodied and lifeless? How much of his suffering was by her hand? How much more would she yet inflict?

Her fears weighed her down; her maturity further bound her limbs. She was no child. Her love, hot as it was, could not melt its icy prison of restraint. The work of rebuilding after a revolution was also no picnic and, tied up by the unending tasks required of her, she ultimately put it out of her mind. All of it. The fears, the heartache, the love itself. Then, after Sion returned to his native home of Sunkland, they grew even further apart. Though they corresponded from time to time, their language—once so casual as to be almost intimate—grew reserved and polite.

When Tiona heard one day that Sion was to be married to a young Sunkland lady, her heart failed to shudder. It failed to...do anything. No sorrow. No envy. Only a slow, stifling loneliness that pressed on her chest, and the somber but earnest hope that the girl to whom he swore could heal that old, aching scar.

"...Ah..."

Tiona woke up. Her mind, still addled by the haze of sleep, tried to recall the dream she had just had. It felt like an important dream. One she mustn't forget. She reached for it, desperately trying to keep hold of the shapeless contents even as they leaked through her fingers like dreams so often did. Before long, it was gone, leaving nothing but the frustrating knowledge that something had once been there.

She sat up, muttering, "What a strange dream..."

The details escaped her, but it had been *strange*. Fantastically so. That alone she still knew. Nonetheless, her hands went to her chest, where they found a restless, aching heart, its rhythm rapid, almost dire. What was supposed to be a relaxing siesta ended up far less restful than she'd hoped.

"I'm probably still not used to sleeping here..." she murmured, recalling that it had been three days since she'd arrived at Count Lampron's residence with Mia's group.

She changed into a dress and left her guest room, only to find the door to a nearby room opening as well.

"Ah, Your Highness..."

The beheaded villain of her forgotten dream, Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon, appeared from the doorway, her face a mask of panic.

Chapter 23: Great Detective Mia...Finds the Perp! By Cheating!

After arriving at Count Lampron's residence, Mia finally had some time to herself. At last, she could peruse the Princess Chronicles in peace.

"Not that it's Esmeralda's fault, but having her around definitely makes it hard to read this properly..."

She quickly flipped to the passage about Sion's death, her eyes scanning the lines one by one. As expected, the details had changed.

"Hm... Well, that's not surprising," she murmured at the end of the first paragraph. "The issue is *how* it changed."

She'd successfully prevented Sion from being pulled into a battle with the bandits. Had that solved the problem for good? Or would Sion meet a different demise? She took a deep breath and kept reading.

Soon, the dreaded words appeared. Sion's new fate, as per the Chronicles, was assassination by poison.

"That does suggest the original bandit incident was probably a targeted hit on him. I mean, I guess it's still possible for it to be a complete coincidence, but... Ugh, what's even going on here...?"

Her muttering stopped when she happened upon a critical sentence. To her glee, this time, the book revealed the culprit's name!

"Yes! Oho ho, this is marvelous! The problem is as good as solved!"

After a moment's elation, the implications of the revelation struck, and she sank back into thought, for the name of the guilty individual was...Echard Sol Sunkland, meaning...

"Sunkland's second prince, Echard... That's Sion's little brother. Why would it be *him* of all people...?"

It didn't make any sense. The more she thought about it, the more her head hurt. By and large, Mia had put in the effort to know all the important people in nearby nations who were politically significant to Tearmoon, from royal families to peerage. Echard, however, was a person she knew only by

name. What reasons he might have for assassinating his brother were completely beyond her.

"This...just got a lot more complicated. It'd be fine if the culprit were some random noble, but the second prince of Sunkland..."

Until moments ago, Mia had been operating under the assumption that if push came to shove, she always had her last resort—sic Dion on the perp. She didn't *want* to do it, but it was deeply comforting to know the option was available. But it no longer was.

"I mean, I never seriously intended on resorting to that kind of violence, so I guess it's not too bad... There is a silver lining here though. The day of the assassination is the day Esmeralda's heading to the royal castle for the ball. I can still try to prevent it from happening by being there in person and playing it by ear. It'll be close but not impossible. But it will be very, very close... Hnnngh..."

She crossed her arms and thought so hard that vapors would be rising from her head if the room were cold enough. After a period of intense brainwork, she toppled face-first onto the bed.

"Nope! Nope, nope, nope! Not a single idea! What should I do? Oh moons, I wish I had some sweets right now. That's it! Right, I can't think without sweets!"

Seeking thought fuel, she stepped out of her room. Coincidentally, something much better than fuel happened to be walking down the hallway toward her—a thought *engine*.

"Oh, what was I thinking? This is exactly why I brought Ludwig with me!"

She promptly did what she did best—wholesale delegation. After all, she'd come prepared. She had Ludwig for brains, Dion for brawn, and Citrina for poison. It'd be a waste not to use her ample resources. Without further ado, she beckoned Ludwig into her room.

"Prince Echard, you say?" asked a puzzled Ludwig.

He'd barely stepped into the room before Mia had posed him the question.

"Yes. Prince Echard. Sion's little brother. Have you heard any rumors about him?"

Ludwig folded his arms pensively. After a period of silence, he shook

his head. “My apologies. I’m not aware of anything in particular that bears mention. If it’s necessary, I can certainly look into the matter...”

“Hmm... In that case, please do.”

Unfortunately, they would not be afforded the time to do so, for not even a second after she made her request...

“Miss Mia! Oh, Miss Mia!”

...The door flew open, and a flustered Esmeralda burst in.

“Moons, what’s gotten into you, Esmeralda? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“A-A ghost would be easier to believe!” she said, stammering. “I-I saw the person I’m supposed to marry, and it’s...it’s...”

Mia waited a second and, seeing that no words seemed to be forthcoming from Esmeralda’s open mouth, sighed and prompted her.

“Well? I’m listening. Who is it?”

“It’s... It’s... Ooooh...”

“Sweet moons, calm down. You’re Esmeralda Greenmoon, for heaven’s sake. The daughter of a Duke. Nothing in the world should be causing you to lose your head like this.”

“I-It’s Prince Echard! I’m supposed to marry Prince Echard!”

“...Huh?”

Mia stared at her, their mouths now equally wide open. It was quite the undignified expression to show in front of Ludwig, but shock trumped propriety. Had she the mind to look, however, she’d have realized that there were three open mouths in the room.

Ludwig reeled from the news as well; he didn’t even notice Mia’s surprise. Only now did all the pieces in his mind fall in place, and they’d landed with the weight of a boulder. He finally understood what Mia had been trying to do all this time.

Esmeralda Greenmoon, daughter of one of Tearmoon’s Four Dukes, was to be married to Echard Sol Sunkland, the second prince of his kingdom. The one mediating the arrangement was Count Lampron, known for his traditionally conservative beliefs... If the marriage was realized, how would the political power map shift?

It would create an oppositional axis of power against the alliance between Her Highness and Prince Sion, led by the House of Greenmoon and Prince Echard.

What had already become a unified front with Mia and the Four Houses would have the Greenmoons ripped from its sphere. The separated house would then become a locus around which anti-empress actors could rally. Worse yet, Duke Greenmoon had a male heir. Should Mia fail the imperial bid, he would be in line for the throne. Then came the implications in Sunkland. Sion and his cautious approach to expansionism would be met with a powerful new foe in the form of a conservative coalition forming around his brother.

No wonder Her Highness asked me to look into Prince Echard... It all makes sense now!

Ludwig bit his lip. His revelation, though crucial, was late.

If only I'd thought a little more about it... If I'd just taken another look at Sunkland's power map and domestic state... The timing, the actors—hindsight makes it so obvious. Why else *would talks of marriage between an Etoiline and a Sunkland noble come up now of all times?*

Mortified by his own oversight, Ludwig lowered his head. "My deepest apologies, Your Highness. I should have seen this coming. This is a terrible failure on my part."

"A failure? I'm not sure I understand what you mean, but..."

Mia arched an eyebrow at him, almost as if she honestly had no idea what he was talking about. He swallowed, regret mixing with gratitude.

Rather than castigating me for my incompetence, she chooses to play the fool...

"I'm counting on you, Ludwig, so keep it up."

Faced with her gentle smile, he could but lower his head yet again.

Chapter 24: At the Edge of the Ring, Princess Mia...Takes a Stray Arrow

"I-It's Prince Echard! I'm supposed to marry Prince Echard!"

"...Huh?"

Mia was dumbfounded by the admission.

H-How? What in the moons is going on?!

Before she could get her thoughts together, Ludwig chimed in unhelpfully with, "My deepest apologies, Your Highness. I should have seen this coming. This is a terrible failure on my part." He even lowered his head, as if he'd committed some grave sin. This only made things more confusing, and Mia was overcome with the desire to scream her frustration out loud. Miraculously, she didn't. Teetering at the edge of the ring, she somehow managed to brace and stay in the bout.

Wait! Not so fast! she thought, steeling her tongue against temptation. *If I say the wrong thing here, I might send Ludwig into a negative spiral and render him useless!*

A moment's thought... Then another... And another. Many moments passed, but she couldn't for the life of her figure out what Ludwig might have done wrong. So, she decided to fess up.

"A failure? I'm not sure I understand what you mean, but..."

When in doubt, ask. After all, "assumptions" make sots out of Mia and puns. And Mia didn't mind puns, she didn't want to be a sot, so she didn't pretend to know what was going on. That was especially dangerous in front of Ludwig.

To her surprise, he didn't immediately answer. Instead, he closed his eyes, as if trying to contain some intense emotion, and kept his head hung.

M-Moons... You have to tell me what you did wrong, or I won't know! Ugh, I've got enough on my plate already with Esmeralda and the marriage and the assassination. I don't need more *mysteries!*

Again, she fought against her inner monologue to deliver a more poised

response. Ring-wise, she'd planted one foot down and recovered her balance.

"I'm counting on you, Ludwig, so keep it up."

There was no point crying over spilt milk. She didn't know what milk he'd spilled, but it wasn't worth him beating himself up over it. She needed him to be alert and functional. Thus, she told him so.

Then, she turned to Esmeralda. "Now then, could you explain to me what happened? Slowly, this time?"

"O-Of course. Okay." Esmeralda nodded. "So, this morning, I got a message from Count Lampron asking me to go see him."

"Ah, yes, I do remember that."

It made sense that the count would want to speak to her. Mia could still remember the expression on his face when she'd arrived at his residence with Sion's guards and told him who she was. He looked like he might have fainted on the spot. In that moment, Mia's detective instincts flared up.

"Aha, I know what's going on here," she murmured to herself. "He's scheming something that involves Esmeralda, and he doesn't want me to know about it..."

Considering the average reaction to the princess of Tearmoon showing up unannounced at one's doorstep was more or less something faint-adjacent, the reliability of her detective instincts was perhaps debatable.

"It said he wanted to discuss some matters about the marriage proposal with me. So I went to turn him down in person. I told him to his face that if he wants me to marry into Sunkland, he'd better bring me at least a prince. And when I said that..."

Apparently, Count Lampron had all but grinned at her answer.

"But of course," he'd said, nodding. "You're absolutely right. A mere noble would hardly be a fitting match for the daughter of one of Tearmoon's Four Dukes. The marriage I propose is between yourself and His Highness Prince Echard. I have already received approval from both His Majesty and the prince himself."

Esmeralda made a point of mimicking the smug face he'd made then.

"I never expected them to *actually* bring me a prince," she mumbled, growing red-cheeked and fidgety.

It was clear that the thought of marrying a prince held the same storybook sway over her as it did most girls. Now that the stuff of fairy tales

was becoming a potential reality, she was losing her cool. Out with the big sister, in with the starstruck maiden.

"I see... If Sion becomes king, that would make Echard something like an Archduke. In that sense, I guess you really are being promised a title higher than Duke."

Not only that, if something were to happen to Sion, her potential husband might very well become king.

Taking the events in the Princess Chronicles into consideration... Does this mean Echard did it on purpose? He offed Sion to make himself king? Maybe that's the motive... Or maybe Echard really doesn't want to get married to Esmeralda, and this is a really drastic way of protesting?

To Echard's would-be relief, this egregiously unflattering depiction of his character was soon discarded.

Nah, that can't be it. Esmeralda's related to me, after all, and she's got the looks to show for it. She's an attractive young lady. As long as she keeps her mouth shut—and her ego in check. But there's no way he'd know about that in advance...

"Um... Miss Mia?"

"Huh?"

Mia snapped out of her thoughts to find an Esmeralda so meek, *she* appeared to be the younger one.

"What... What do you think I should do?"

Gone was her usual confidence.

"Hm... Well, if you don't want to get married, then I say you should just tell them no."

"That may prove difficult," said Ludwig, interrupting their conversation with a grim shake of his head. "May I ask what His Imperial Majesty's stance is regarding this matter?"

"Huh?" Mia had kept herself inside the edge of the ring, but now, a stray arrow came flying!

Chapter 25: No Sweets, Only Jelly

It was only a few days ago when Mia had thought, *Seriously, Esmeralda? You didn't even ask about what family your potential husband is from? How scatterbrained do you have to be?*

Even if she fully intended to turn down the proposal, there was a minimum amount of due diligence to be done. Knowing the guy's name was definitely part of that minimum. For a young lady of noble upbringing, such carelessness was, frankly, shameful.

Now, this boomerang of an opinion was coming straight back at her.

"Y-You want to know what father has said? Uh..."

For all her faults, Esmeralda was still a proud Etoile. A marriage proposal involving her was no small matter. It was both proper and likely that the emperor had already been consulted and given his approval. Conversely, if the emperor was somehow in the dark, that alone would cast a very dubious light on the whole affair. By corollary, one should also consult the emperor before turning down such an offer.

Mia had not, in fact, consulted the emperor. In her defense, she'd been desperately battling his stubborn insistence to come on the trip with her, leaving her little time or mental capacity to consider other issues.

That's no excuse! Gah, how could I have been so careless?

Recognizing that this was ultimately her own mistake, she considered her options. Lying to Ludwig was a big no-no. At the same time, she couldn't just admit that she'd failed to even bring up the issue with the emperor. After a brief, brain-racking silence, she went with, "I, uh, wasn't able to get that information out of him."

Her answer walked right on the line between admitting fault and denying fault. It could be interpreted as "because I didn't ask" but also "I asked, but I still couldn't." At the very least, it wasn't an outright lie. Feeling safe behind a wall of plausible deniability, she stole a glance at Ludwig.

"Which could suggest His Imperial Majesty wasn't informed," he

murmured, arms folded in contemplation. “Or...the emperor himself doesn’t wish to see Your Highness become empress? No, that can’t be... He’s such a doting father. Why would he oppose his daughter? Unless...this is a greater love. As a parent, he doesn’t want his dear daughter to walk the same thorny path of power as he did...”

Seeing that Ludwig’s attention had been sufficiently redirected, Mia let out a breath of relief...

“But what did you mean by ‘that may prove difficult,’ uh, Ludwig?”

...Only for Esmeralda to pull the topic right back to where they’d started!

My, I had no idea she knew his name. Wait, does that mean she thinks he’s handsome enough to warrant her attention?

It was no secret that Esmeralda was *very* much into pretty boys. Even her usually uncontainable ego shrank a little in their presence.

I mean, Ludwig isn’t exactly ugly, but she really ought to be a little more selective.

Mia frowned at her friend before turning toward Ludwig, whose expression remained grim.

“A marriage between an Etoiline and the second prince is a matter of national import. The diplomatic significance of such a union cannot be understated. It represents a tightening of relations between Tearmoon and Sunkland.”

In other words, the sheer scale of the issue rendered Esmeralda’s personal feelings and Mia’s political considerations irrelevant.

“And, as I’m sure Your Highness is already aware, our adversaries intend to take advantage of this. The fact that they chose this specific moment to unveil the suitor’s identity is proof enough. Given our circumstances, this marriage proposal is now very difficult to dismiss,” Ludwig explained before turning to Mia. “I assume this is why you asked me to investigate Prince Echard, is it not?”

It sure as hell wasn’t, but Mia nodded anyway. “More or less, yes.”

Mia’s inner jellyfish astutely perceived an oncoming wave and chose to ride it. Insomuch as jellyfish could ride, anyway. It mostly consisted of just going with the flow.

Ludwig, unaware of the gelatinous nature of Mia’s response, took it at face value. “Needless to say, as it currently stands, allowing this marriage to

proceed would deal a significant, if not fatal blow to our empress faction. A crucial factor is whether Lady Esmeralda sides with Your Highness." He turned toward her. "I am of the opinion that we can place our full trust in you, Lady Esmeralda."

"Of course you can. I wouldn't betray Miss Mia. That's simply not something that would ever happen!" she said, hand over chest and chin tilted upward.

Had this been the old Esmeralda, Mia would have taken the statement with plenty of salt, but lately, she was starting to have some more faith in her friend. Enough to make her pause and legitimately consider the option of putting a good deal of her eggs in Esmeralda's basket.

"Even if I do get married," Esmeralda continued, "I'll do my absolute best to influence my father and brother, but I can't guarantee they'll listen."

"In that case, we should try to stop the marriage talks from proceeding. We will need a plan. And considering Your Highness asked me to look into Prince Echard," said Ludwig, turning back toward Mia, "I assume you already have one in mind?"

"R-Really? Do you, Miss Mia?"

"Uh, well... Yes, sort of..." Swept up by the tide of expectant gazes, Mia could only submit to her jellyfish ways.

"Excellent. In that case, I shall focus on gathering as much information as possible on Prince Echard. In the meantime, Your Highness can proceed with your plan as you see fit."

Ludwig's eyes radiated a respect bordering on reverence, while Esmeralda's sparkled with profound faith. Mia met each of their gazes for a second.

"Very well. I'll leave you to your tasks then," she said with a slow nod before adding, "I think I'll go for a quick walk..."

With that, she slipped out of the room.

Wh-What am I supposed to do now? I told them I have a plan, but I have nothing of the sort! Augh, I need to get my thoughts in order, but I don't have any sweets! I need sweets!

Having burned through all her mental fuel in the intensive conversation, she began to wearily shamble down the hall.

"Ah, Your Highness..."

A voice caused her to look up. "My... Tiona, you're awake. How was

your nap?”

The Rudolvons generally observed a laborer’s schedule, waking up early in the morning to head out to the fields with their farmers, where they would oversee the farm work, at times helping out themselves. Then, they’d go for a quick midday doze. Even after enrolling in Saint-Noel, Tiona had continued to adhere to this schedule and take daily naps at noon.

“It was good, thank you very much. I got plenty of rest.”

“Hm, that’s good to hear. Oh, in that case, would you happen to have some free time? I’m thinking of heading out to town to refresh my mind, and I’d love it if you could come with me.”

Thus, Mia headed out with Tiona and Liora in tow in search of that precious fuel of the noggin—sweets!

Chapter 26: Actors Assemble

The capital of the sun-blessed kingdom of Sunkland was Sol Saliente. When viewed from afar, the city was shaped like one massive fortress. The castle proper, Solecsudo Castle, sat atop its highest point. Built for war, the heavily fortified structure overlooked the capital from a central position. There was a solemn magnificence to the city's solid stone architecture, which was protected by a thick encircling wall that towered over any would-be invaders.

Wow... If Tearmoon and Sunkland ever went to war, this would be one heck of a stronghold to take down. Even with Remno's help, I'm not sure how we'd storm this place. Even a military amateur like Mia could see that Sol Saliente would not fall easily. *This only makes it more important to save Sion. I need him alive for as long as possible so our nations remain friends...*

While pondering the implications of diplomatic fallout, she noticed some unusual behavior from Tiona, who kept turning her head from side to side like a curious tourist. She let her be, walking alongside her atop a beautiful road of paved stone. Soon, she was gripped by a strange feeling.

Who knew there'd be a day when I'd be walking down the capital of Sunkland with Tiona? And doing so to save Sion's life, to boot.

Had it been proposed to guillotine-bound Mia, it'd have sounded like a pipe dream of the craziest sort. A glance backward revealed Anne and Liora chatting up a storm. One was her most loyal friend. The other, a Lulu who'd been out for her blood. Emotions welled up in her chest as Mia reflected on the sheer miracle that was her current reality.

I'd never have imagined such a scene would be possible. When I'm walking with them like this, it really makes me feel like I've come a long way...

"That was quite the journey, wasn't it?" she said with a smile, the expression distant, almost wry. Then, turning to Tiona, she added, "I sure didn't expect us to be attacked by bandits."

“Yes, that was certainly an ordeal...”

“I’m sorry I keep dragging you into trouble like this.”

“Wh-What? No! That’s not your fault at all!” Tiona shook her head. “And even if you’d known there might be trouble, then all that means is that you felt it was necessary to bring me along despite the risk. In that case, I’m more than happy to be here.”

The unwavering trust in her eyes hit Mia’s conscience like a hammer. She almost grunted out loud. “I-I see. I, uh...suppose you’re right. We’re friends now, after all, so it should be fine for me to ask for your help. In which case, consider this my belated request then. Oho ho.”

They shared a chuckle, allowing Mia to recompose her thoughts. That was, after all, what she’d set out to do in the first place.

All right. I’m here to think, so let’s do that. The thing is, the more I think about it, the more difficult it seems to stop Esmeralda and Prince Echard from getting married...

Relations between Tearmoon and Sunkland were lukewarm at best. Mia and Sion were on good terms, which certainly helped, but that was hardly a sufficient foundation for building foreign policy. A marriage between one of Tearmoon’s Four Houses and Prince Echard was the kind of event that could truly cement diplomatic alliances. Like Ludwig had said, it was very literally a matter of national import. Reversing it was going to be *tough*.

Huh. Speaking of Tearmoon and Sunkland, that reminds me... If Sion and Tiona got married in the old timeline, that would definitely keep Tearmoon safe... They seemed to understand each other pretty well, and there was a lot of political benefit to them getting together, so I can’t imagine anything going wrong...

Then, a thought occurred to her.

“Except...how the pair in question actually feels. Huh.”

It was a crucial thought, one that touched on the very core of this entire dilemma.

Frankly, knowing Esmeralda and her penchant for cute boys, I can definitely see her taking a liking to Prince Echard...

Currently, Esmeralda was eighteen, and Prince Echard was ten. There were eight years between them, which was a fair bit, but hardly unheard of for noble marriages.

Yes, she’d definitely be into him. All she cares about is looks anyway,

and considering how infuriatingly good-looking Sion is, she'd probably okay his little brother on future prospects alone.

That made Mia rather hesitant to sabotage the marriage for political purposes alone. That left only a single consideration—Sion's assassination. If she could somehow keep Sion safe, she honestly wasn't that opposed to Esmeralda picking up a little husband.

The problem is, all this scheming against Sion smells very Serpent-y, and even if they're not behind this, I'm not sure if I'd be okay letting Esmeralda marry someone who's behind an assassination attempt.

Her walk was proving quite fruitful; the heart of the problem was becoming clear.

"Huh. So that's it. Basically, if the other party in this marriage consists of decent, non-snakey people, then I don't actually mind if they go ahead __"

"Gosh, Mia, is that really you?"

Hearing her name, Mia turned in the voice's direction to find an unexpected figure.

"M-Miss Rafina? What brings you here? And is that...?"

The person standing next to Rafina shocked her even more.

"Abel! What in the moons are the two of you doing in Sunkland?"

Chapter 27: Annoyingly Cute

Along the main street of Sol Saliente stood a well-furnished inn. Its first floor had been fashioned as a restaurant, allowing it to service even those who didn't intend to stay the night.

"This place is one of my favorites," said a beaming Rafina. "The food here is simply *superb*. A trip to Sol Saliente wouldn't be complete without enjoying a meal here."

When the middle-aged man attending them matched her smile, Mia knew this place meant business.

"Really now... That certainly sounds promising," she murmured as she perused the menu. "By the way, would you happen to have any mushroom dishes?"

A sharp glint flashed across the man's eyes. "Why yes. In fact, we knew Lady Rafina would be here today, so we prepared some sautéed Belluga mushrooms."

"Oh? How lucky of me. I didn't think I'd get to enjoy some Belluga mushrooms here in Sunkland."

"We also have some pot-steamed matsutake mushrooms. This is an eastern specialty in which the stock thoroughly extracts the matsutake's essence, making for a richer, more concentrated flavor."

"My! Are you telling me you concentrated the savoriness of mushrooms in a soup? I've never heard of such a thing!"

"And that's not all..."

After extensively discussing the wonders of mushroom cuisines, a satisfied Mia let the man go.

"Now then..." she said, turning back toward Rafina and Abel. "What an extraordinary coincidence it is to meet you two here. I hope you've both been well?"

"We certainly have, and I'm glad to see that you're in good spirits," said Rafina with a giggle. "Were you invited to the royal ball as well?"

Mia shook her head. "No, I'm here with Esmeralda to discuss her

potential marriage. She received a proposal from Sunkland...” She trailed off as she got the feeling that something wasn’t adding up. *This royal ball Miss Rafina was invited to, it must be the same one Esmeralda’s attending, right? In that case...*

She jiggled the disparate pieces of information in her head, trying to make them align. “Is that why you’re here too, Abel?”

Abel shrugged. “Apparently so, though I’m really just standing in for my brother. I happened to run into Miss Rafina’s group on the way to the capital, so we traveled the last leg of the journey here together.”

“Ah, so that explains why you were enjoying a nice stroll with Miss Rafina down the streets of Sol Saliente. Hm, hm, I see.”

She shot him a pointed glare.

“What? W-Wait, hold on a minute. I think you’re getting the wrong idea. It’s not like that.”

He hastily shook his head. And his hands. The panicked motion caused her to burst out laughing. “Oh, relax, Abel. It was just a joke. I couldn’t be happier to see you here.”

Mia, technically a full-grown woman, just teased a boy for her amusement.

Abel was not amused. He quickly turned his face away. As he did, Mia caught the slightest glimpse of a pout. “I see,” he said sullenly. “It was a joke. That’s rather disappointing.”

“Hm? Why is it disappointing?”

“Well, I *was* feeling all warm and fuzzy inside thinking you were jealous. I thought you cared. And then I’m told it’s all a joke. Which, just so you know, really hurts. So could you just leave me alone for a bit? Thanks.” He let out a sigh so despondent it chilled the room air. This time, it was Mia’s turn to lose her cool.

“Uh, Abel? Come on. I didn’t mean it like that. It was a joke, but not like, *a joke*, you know? And what do you mean you thought I cared? Of course I care. What’s that got to do with jealous—”

She stopped when Abel turned back toward her, his face bearing the widest grin she’d ever seen. “Aaaaand now we’re even. A joke for a joke. Couldn’t be happier to see you too.”

“*...Huh?!*”

Mia let out that signature gasp so often uttered by those deeply indignant

or offended.

“You know me,” he quipped. “Always a firm believer of evening the score.”

Mia, technically a full-grown woman, was just teased by a boy for his amusement.

“Y-You’re... You’re...so mean! Ugh, I can’t believe you, Abel!”

She shook her fists up and down in protest. For a child, the gesture would have been endearing. For someone of Mia’s age, it straddled the line between annoying and cute—it was *annoyingly cute*. Fortunately, the opinions of those around her seemed to skew considerably toward the latter, and they watched her with tender expressions. Rafina and Anne smiled at her like she were a younger sister in the midst of a minor and lovable outburst. Abel all but doted on her. Even Tiona and Liora found themselves disarmed by this rare display of childishness from Mia. They let out a collective sigh so fond it warmed the room air.

Lest it be forgotten, Mia had a good twenty-something years under her belt. No one in the room knew that, but it still bears mentioning.

After recovering from her public flirting session, Mia’s mind—possibly by pure chance—finally jiggled the pieces into place and discovered the identity of that nagging feeling she’d been having.

So, Miss Rafina and Abel are both going to the ball... Wait. Hm? Then how come I wasn’t invited?

That was the million-coin question. Why in the world had everyone been invited except her?

How odd... I wonder why... Hm, I have no idea.

A scene from the previous timeline involving a dance party and her uninvited, partner-less self flitted across her mind. She quickly pushed it back out. That was a trauma she didn’t need to relive.

Chapter 28: A Terrifying Truth (Of Terror!)

After Mia and Abel's public display of affection concluded, the conversation returned to a more serious note.

"By the way, Mia, what was that about a marriage proposal? And does it somehow involve our friends here?" asked Rafina, gesturing at Tiona and Liora.

"Actually, it does," Mia answered before glancing around warily.

Rafina got the hint and smiled. "It's all right. The owner of this establishment is a trustworthy individual with a very tight lip. We can speak freely here."

Said owner stepped in just in time to catch her compliment. He laughed self-consciously and placed a few dishes of food on the table.

"I'm deeply honored by your words, Lady Rafina. I made sure to have the whole place reserved in advance for you, so there is no one else here today. Once I finish serving all the food, I will also retreat to the back room so you can enjoy full privacy," he said, clearly accustomed to her demands.

Rafina leaned toward Mia and whispered in her ear.

"You know, he's actually a Belluga spy."

"Uh, what?"

Mia almost choked on her spit. Last she checked, the whole point of spies was to keep their identities secret. Sure, they were allies in the fight against the Chaos Serpents, but diplomacy and intelligence-gathering between nations existed on an entirely different level. They might have been friends, but that did not make it okay to divulge such information willy-nilly. Worried that this was some sort of serious espionage faux pas, Mia was just about to question the statement's appropriateness when she noticed the expression on Rafina's face—the grin of a successful prank.

"But his work doesn't involve other nations," she explained. "He's a special spy, because he's part of our intelligence war against the Serpents."

Mia nodded. The Chaos Serpents were indeed an elusive group. It made sense for each nation to deploy undercover agents to suss them out.

"Ah, I see. In that case..."

She resolved to confide in them the details. At first, she wasn't quite sure how to broach the topic, but once she started talking, the words came swiftly and naturally. After all, for all its complexity, it was fundamentally about a relationship. Being a girl, Mia was very much into relationship stories—both hearing and telling them. She liked them a lot more than ghost stories, at least. With the tone of a scholar, she described how a marriage proposal was being discussed between Esmeralda and Sunkland's second prince, how Count Lampron had initiated the talks, and how it all tied into Tearmoon's anti-empress faction.

It was, of course, ninety-nine percent regurgitation; she was just parroting what Ludwig had said. To her credit, she made no mention of Echard plotting Sion's assassination. That was dangerous information, and she had to be very careful about its disclosure.

"So, just so I know I'm understanding this correctly, what you're saying is that there's a faction in Tearmoon that opposes you, and they're trying to collude with the anti-Sion faction in Sunkland," said Rafina.

Her succinct summary was actually an impressive feat. Mia was a bit of an incompetent parrot, and she'd left out a *lot* of crucial details. Nevertheless, Rafina had managed to connect the dots and grasp the whole picture.

"Yes, yes, that's correct," replied Mia. "By the way, Miss Rafina... Would you happen to know what kind of person this Count Lampron is?"

"Hm... Let me think..." Rafina pursed her lips. "I'd say he gives me the impression of a typical old-fashioned Sunkland noble. I'm sure you're aware of how Sunkland royalty prizes justice and fairness?"

"Why, yes. I've experienced it firsthand, in fact." Firstneck, to be exact. Those words would always evoke the smell of moldy wood and rusty iron for her.

"That attitude isn't unique to Sunkland. The Central Orthodox Church promotes the same values as well."

The Church viewed nobles as those who'd been granted the power to rule by God. Kings, in turn, were those who led those nobles and ensured peace and order in their lands. To that end, they were granted an even

greater power to rule. All this was ultimately for the purpose of allowing the people under their protection to live safe, prosperous lives. Whether nobility or royalty, so long as they were bestowed power, they had a duty to wield it justly and fairly to combat evil. These maxims were, in fact, present in the holy scriptures of the Church, and they were the basis with which the aristocracy claimed authority over their domains and people.

"Unfortunately," Rafina explained, "the interpretation of those values is sometimes twisted for personal interest. There are nobles who claim that they're free to rule as they please since they were granted the power to rule by God, and they even go so far as to oppress their own people. Royalty is no exception. There are certainly cruel kings who commit atrocities. These all need to be rectified. But that's not all. At times, the motive may be pure, but the skills are lacking. Rulers who do not possess the competence to correctly govern their lands must also be punished accordingly."

Kings and queens, dukes and duchesses—they were all the same in the eyes of the Lord, having been tasked with maintaining peace and order amongst the lands. So long as their authority originated from the scriptures, failure to abide by its principles necessitated penalties, which would be carried out by other sovereignties under the Church's umbrella.

"And in Sunkland's case," Rafina continued, "they've long believed that the royal families of all other nations are corrupt, so subjugating them—whether by diplomacy or force—is actually doing their people a service, for it places them under the King of Sunkland's righteous rule. It's quite the pervasive attitude here. Ask anyone; there's a good chance they'll tell you that the shortest path to good governance is to be ruled by a righteous king."

This attitude was then pushed into more extreme territory by the White Crows.

"From time to time, this logic has been used to justify invasions of other nations, and Count Lampron has certainly employed it before, but I've never associated him with hegemonic ambition. He always seemed like the type to take Sunkland's beliefs at face value. I think he honestly believes he's working for justice and the greater good."

"Ah. That's...inconvenient."

An ambitious hegemonist could still be reasoned with, as there was still room for compromise. A *believer* was different, as that turned the issue from one of interest to one of morals, making persuasion difficult, if not

impossible.

"Prince Sion probably became disillusioned by Sunkland's methods during the incident in Reno," said Rafina. "That has made him more cautious about foreign interventions, but I can't imagine Count Lampron agreeing with that approach."

Hmm... So basically, Sion's getting in their way. Maybe there's someone else behind Prince Echard, and it's Count Lampron? Or was Prince Echard driven purely by his own ambition? Mia folded her arms pensively. *Based on Sion's and Miss Rafina's depictions, Count Lampron doesn't seem like the kind of person to assassinate royalty. Political meddling, I wouldn't be surprised if he had a hand in, but not murder.*

She got a whiff of obstinacy from the fellow. The kind of obstinacy that frequently went hand in hand with incompetence.

And, I mean, it's always possible he's being manipulated by the Serpents. Hm...

Now, it is time to reveal a most terrifying truth. As a matter of fact, by this point, the person who had conducted the most comprehensive inquiry and possessed the most extensive grasp of Sion's upcoming assassination was, believe it or not, Mia.

Mia was ahead of the pack! Let that sink in for a bit.

Then, after the initial impact of that statement wears off, you'll probably realize that literally nobody else except the culprits even knew there was an assassination being planned, and the feat will seem far less impressive. Regardless, it was an instance of Mia gaining information superiority over all other actors, and that is something worth mentioning.

Also, it's fortunate that awareness of this precarious situation would never befall Sion, or god forbid, Keithwood. The former would likely be gripped by terror, while the latter might just faint on the spot.

Chapter 29: Two Scents

“Hmm... By the way, Miss Rafina, would you mind if I asked your opinion on the matter?” asked Mia as a question occurred to her. “Do you agree with Count Lampron’s view? That corrupt nobles should be removed —by force if necessary?”

Rafina tilted her head thoughtfully. She opened her mouth to answer, then reconsidered and averted her gaze. After a short silence, she finally spoke. “I did...once.” After another pause, she then added, “And still do sometimes, if I’m being honest.”

S-Seriously?!

Mia’s hands shot to her head to make sure it was still there.

For the most part, Mia thought of Rafina as a friend. This was, in fact, a fairly recent development; it took a good deal of time to overcome her past trauma. She was quite enjoying not having to constantly worry about being denounced and guillotined. That relief proved woefully short-lived.

Oh, moons... Miss Rafina’s wrath is still very much incurable. I’d better make sure I don’t accidentally oppress anyone... The slightest misstep could be my last...

Friends forgive each other, but there are limits to said forgiveness. A prank or two could be laughed off, but breaking something precious of theirs? Ruining a cake they were about to eat? Yes, some acts simply cross the line.

In Rafina’s case, her fury was triggered by acts of selfishness or tyranny by the nobility. Indolence tended to set her off too. This aspect of her character was something Mia had already figured out. Furthermore, Mia knew that there were times when she could be a little selfish. Bossy too, and that was like tyranny-lite. As for indolence... Maybe a teeny-weeny bit of that as well. As a result, Rafina’s admission had caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand on end. However...

“But... Ever since we became friends, Mia, I’ve noticed myself changing. You too, Tiona. After getting to know you, I’ve started seeing

things in a new light."

"...Huh?" said Tiona with a start. She hadn't expected the conversation to suddenly turn to her.

"During the student council election, I heard that you forgave the people who'd harassed you. Not only forgave them, but worked with them arm in arm to support Mia."

"Oh, now that you mention it, I guess that did happen..." Mia murmured, recalling the events in the classroom that day.

I'd been planning to do some sneaky stuff behind the scenes to beat Rafina in the election, but in hindsight, am I ever glad I didn't end up doing that. A misstep there might have permanently ruined Miss Rafina's impression of me.

The thought made her shudder.

Moons... I had no idea back then, but I was playing with fire.

Rafina smiled softly at her and continued. "That was when I finally understood... I remember thinking, 'Oh, so this is the world she's working toward. This...is what had always lain at the end of her distant gaze.'"

Mia arched an eyebrow. She had no idea what world she was working toward, nor what lay at the end of her gaze.

Rafina, eyes narrowed nostalgically, didn't notice the reaction. "Do you remember how, on the day of the new student welcome ceremony, there was that incident during the dance party, and you came to me afterward to ask for their forgiveness?"

"Of course. I remember it like yesterday," Mia answered, nodding vigorously to hide the fact that she *did* remember it like yesterday—yesterday's classwork, to be exact, which she often had trouble recalling.

"When you showed up, I was impressed, but to be honest, I was equally disappointed. I thought you were being too soft on them." Rafina shook her head. "But no more. Looking back, I now see that what you did was something that would test my forbearance, but should it succeed, would allow for a much more prosperous future..."

That forgiveness had led to so much. Had she expelled the troublemakers from Saint-Noel then, none of the following events would have happened. Instead, the expelled would have harbored a lasting grudge, and Mia's camp wouldn't have won as much support as they did during the election.

“It was as if you were making a statement to me through your actions, Mia. And...it made me think. It still does.”

“About what?”

“About our opponents this time, and whether dismissing them as lost causes is truly the right thing to do... Perhaps it would be better to try persuading them to change their ways for the better...”

Mia could barely believe the words coming out of Rafina’s mouth. They were good words, though, and she definitely wanted to hear more.

Yes! Yes, that’s it! That’s the right attitude, Miss Rafina!

She had to stop herself from pumping her fist in excitement.

If Rafina was truly considering such an approach, it would signal a fundamental shift in her way of thinking. A more lenient Rafina meant a single misstep wouldn't immediately put Mia on trial, or worse, her head on the guillotine.

After all, I'm not perfect. It happens very rarely, but I do *make the tiniest of mistakes sometimes. So it's very helpful for Miss Rafina to be thinking about things like this!*

Seeing that she was on safer terms with Rafina than she'd thought, Mia immediately resolved to be less strict with herself. She was, you see, ever vigilant. Her vigilance was just in service of slacking off.

"Also, and this really is just a gut feeling," added Rafina, "I suspect that being too hard on people creates openings for the Serpents to exploit..."

"The Chaos Serpents, huh...?"

Mia thought about the future she'd heard from Bel. In it, Rafina had become Empress Prelate and subjected the world to a reign of terror. She'd advocated complete eradication of all foes, and her insistence on the extreme approach had bordered on obsession. Her unbridled wrath, though effective against the Serpents, also bore the risk of being exploited by them in return. Meanwhile, the bodies had just kept piling up.

Gut feeling though it was, Mia felt there was truth to Rafina's hunch.

"Oh, bother. And here I was going to... But I see that you're already very busy," said Rafina with a disappointed sigh.

"Huh? What were you going to do if I weren't busy?"

"Well, you see, the ball isn't the *only* reason I came to Sunkland. A few days ago, I heard some...troubling news about the Equestrian Kingdom from Malong, and I'm here to discuss it with the king."

"My, the Equestrian Kingdom..."

"To be completely honest, I was really hoping you'd be able to lend me a hand, but I guess there's nothing to be done. You've already got plenty on your plate, after all."

Hmm, is it just me, or...

Mia's nose caught two scents. The first was that of danger; the whole situation reeked of it. Rafina had personally made the journey to Sunkland. That alone spoke volumes about the severity of her concern. Whatever the issue, it was *bad news*.

As if Sion's assassination and Esmeralda's marriage proposal weren't

problematic enough. She wasn't about to sign herself up for another headache. In general, Mia preferred to stay as far away from trouble as possible.

Is this something I should avoid touching at all costs...? Yes, this is definitely no time for curiosity. Like they say, curiosity killed the princess.

It didn't take long for her to conclude that not getting involved was the best option.

We all know she'd end up getting involved anyway—she wouldn't be Mia otherwise. But just let her have this for now.

As for the second scent...

"It seems that our meal is on the way, so how about we dine first and talk more later?"

It was that of food. As an earthenware pot was placed on the table before her, she let out a gasp of glee.

"My! This must be the pot-steamed matsutake! Aaaah... What a sublime aroma..."

And so, after enjoying a most scrumptious meal of Rafina-endorsed dishes, Mia returned to Count Lampron's residence, fulfilled in both spirit and gut.

What was that? What about Esmeralda's impending marriage, you ask? And the truth behind Sion's looming assassination?

Well, let's just say that the expression "dine first and talk more later" placed more emphasis on the former.

Chapter 30: Two Girls and a Workhorse

"Bel, would you like to head out for a walk? I was thinking we could take a look around the city."

Seeing that her friend had, after much whining and grumbling, finally completed the homework Ludwig had left for her, Citrina suggested some recreation.

The two of them were currently in Count Lampron's guest room. Despite the presence of Duke Yellowmoon's daughter, however, no one else from her house was in attendance. She didn't even bring any guards. This was not a sign of Yellowmoon's fall from grace. Rather, it was a precautionary measure by Lorenz; a conspicuous Yellowmoon presence might attract unwanted suspicion. Mia wouldn't mind, but others such as Esmeralda and Tiona might not be so trusting. To this end, he'd refrained from sending any of his own men and placed the safety of his daughter entirely in the hands of Mia and her escort.

Which would normally entail one of Mia's more experienced maids being assigned to her for the trip, but Citrina had declined. "Oh, don't worry, Your Highness. There's no need to make such meticulous arrangements for Rina," she'd said, smiling. "I'm perfectly fine on my own, so feel free to post only the bare minimum of guards."

Did this attitude reflect her past trauma of being constantly monitored by Barbara? No, actually. Not at all. It was driven by a strong desire to get certain things done on this trip. Things like...go on a walk together! Go shopping together! Hide under the covers and chat the night away together!

That's right. This was Citrina's first time going on a trip with a friend—a genuine one sans scheming and calculation—and she was going to enjoy the living moons out of it. Having people follow her around would be terribly bothersome, so she made an effort to remove all elements that could interfere with her plans.

A trip with Bel was serious business.

It followed, then, that the second she saw Bel finish her last question,

she'd suggest an outing. And Bel, being Bel, of course said yes. This was the home of her beloved Libra King. She sure wasn't going to stay put inside. So, the two grinning girls made for the door. Their departure was witnessed by a certain individual though, and said individual did *not* approve of their outing!

When Count Lampron's guard captain, Connery Caldwell, saw the two young girls saunter out the main door of the residence, he let out the kind of bone-weary sigh of those who'd just *had enough*.

For a bit of background, this was the man who had been in charge of the escort that had guarded Mia on her way to the capital. Through his diligent attitude, he'd gained the count's absolute trust. Which, honestly, only gave him more work, but he slogged through it like the workhorse he was. He'd just finished the nerve-wracking job of keeping a group of super-VIPs safe on their journey to Sunkland and was winding down with some less stressful work. Not relaxing, oh no. That would be too reasonable. Upon arriving, he'd been tasked with looking after the guests' needs as their attendant. He was used to this kind of thing, though, and he'd taken it in stride. A concerningly wobbly kneed stride, but a stride nonetheless.

Earlier, he'd almost had a heart attack when he caught the Tearmoon princess and one of her female friends walking out the Lampron residence with only two of her own men. That flew in the face of all common sense. The royal capital was not a dangerous place by any means, but this was the Tearmoon princess, for crying out loud! Sure, the chances of something going wrong were extremely low, but come on. Two guards would probably be enough, but in his line of work, one did not tempt fate with *probably*s.

He'd shot out the door at a full dash and managed to convince her to let him arrange for two more men from Lampron's private army to accompany her, and that was only *after* promising they'd stay out of her sight as much as possible.

"Honestly, I'm not sure why you even bother," Mia had said with an arched eyebrow before leaving. "I mean, I already brought my own guards..."

The expression of sheer puzzlement on her face had been profoundly vexing.

I bother because you're the freaking Princess of Tearmoon, but I guess

only one of us realizes that, he muttered in his head.

And now, *another* pair of young noble girls were trying to sneak out. If he had a copper for every sigh he'd heaved on this job...

One of the girls was Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon, the daughter of one of Tearmoon's Four Dukes. The fact that she was born to one of the empire's highest-ranking nobles was seriously stress-inducing. And then there was the girl with her, who was even more of a problem. Who the hell *was* she, even?

All I know is that she's called Miabel. What's the deal with this mystery girl? She's the spitting image of Princess Mia, and she's got her attitude too. The girl's walking around with a Duke's daughter as if she belongs there. And I've seen her chatting casually with the princess on more than one occasion. Seriously, who is *she?!*

There was something uncanny about Miabel that gave him the creeps. He couldn't help but feel that if something were to happen to her, his head would roll. Literally. That fear drove him to his feet. Being a man of action, he swiftly acted on his hunch.

"Excuse me, Lady Citrina and Lady Miabel," said Connery, stopping the two girls before they could leave.

They looked at him with innocent surprise. Considering they more or less held his life in their questionably sensible hands, their youthful faces were, in his eyes, adorned with something that more resembled horns than a halo.

"If I may be so bold, could I inquire about where you are headed?" he asked with a heavily implied *"Because if it ain't that important, for the love of all that is holy, could the two of you young ladies please just stay put in this nice big mansion?"*

"Sure! We're going to walk around the capital and see all the amazing sights in this city!" answered Bel, who bobbed up and down with excitement.

His implied message clearly did not get through.

Yep. Definitely saw that one coming. All right then... His stomach churned. *Damn thing must be acting up again.* Not that he was surprised. It'd been acting up ever since he'd started on this job.

"Very well. In that case, allow me to personally accompany you for your safety."

Chapter 31: Citrina's Happiness

If Connery could shake his past self's hand, he would. Thank god he'd gotten up and followed the girls out, because they were a freaking disaster waiting to happen!

He'd come upon this realization not long after leaving the Lampron residence, when his young charges proved themselves to be free spirits with a serious emphasis on "free."

"Where, if you don't mind me asking, will you be headed first?" he'd asked, mentally preparing a map of the city for reference.

"Oh, I don't know. Wherever. Hey, Bel, is there any place you want to see?" asked Citrina as she tilted her head.

Bel shook hers. "Not really. Getting to walk around the place where the Lib— I mean, where Prince Sion was born is more than enough for me. Oooh, look at that."

Without the slightest hesitation, Bel slipped into an alleyway. It was dim and narrow, the kind of place no highborn lady should ever be seen in.

"Lady Bel, could you please refrain from rushing ahead by yourself?" pleaded Connery as he hurried to catch up.

Citrina, walking alongside him, gave him a puzzled glance. "Oh? Why do you say that? We're in the capital city of Sunkland, so shouldn't it be safe here?"

There was no discernible snark to the question. Unfortunately, the innocent curiosity of the question only sharpened its unintended edge.

Connery grunted wryly. "It pains me to admit, but even here in the capital, there are locations I wouldn't recommend to young ladies such as yourselves. The first district is close to the royal castle, so it should be fine here, but..." he explained, keeping his language vague to avoid upsetting the girls. "A portion of the capital is an open market, freely accessible to all traveling merchants passing through the city. There can at times be individuals of unclear background or questionable character there."

"Oh, my... How dreadful." Citrina reached for Bel's hand and squeezed

it.

Connery felt a pang of guilt at the knowledge that he'd just scared the poor girl. He quickly shook his head. "But it's very very rare for anything bad to actually happen, of course. It's a very low risk, but a necessary one. Tighten the rules too much, and we'll end up choking the life out of the city."

For someone in Connery's position, the ideal city would be one in which every last resident was a loyal citizen who'd sworn allegiance to the king. However, he recognized the fact that eliminating all foreign elements from the capital and barring all entry by outsiders would effectively strangle commerce, resulting in an increasingly spiritless city. There was a certain liveliness to be found in disorder. Just as soil required manure, a dab of the dark and dubious was essential for a city. It was the bed on which enterprise grew. The way he saw it, the open market and its slightly questionable safety was a necessary evil.

"I see. So a kingdom needs places like that too..." said Bel, nodding as if she'd learned something profound. Then, she looked up at him and asked with big, wide eyes, "I want to see this open market! Can you take us there, please?"

Again with that innocent expression! Connery almost bashed his head against the nearby wall. Didn't he just tell her the place was *dangerous*? Clearly, nothing he said was getting through to these girls.

"Ugh, what is it with highborns and being insufferable? Are they all like this?" he muttered under his breath as his restraint gave way before frustration. "This reminds me of the time Prince Echard asked me to take him to the market... Damn kid vanished in the middle of the trip for a bit. Found him eventually, but god, that must have shaved a few years off my life."

Count Lampron had spent some time with Prince Echard as his swordsmanship mentor. As one of Lampron's close retainers, Connery was well-acquainted with the prince, making his brief disappearance that much more distressing. Had it been Sion, Connery would have been prepared for such behavior; the older prince was known for his occasional reckless streaks. Echard, meanwhile, was supposed to be a docile child. The last thing Connery had expected was to turn around and find him missing.

"Thank god nothing happened that time. I found him safe and sound,

and he promised not to tell the king or the count. Otherwise, my head would be in a gutter somewhere."

The way he stared transfixed at an actual gutter on the ground before shaking his head with a start suggested he might need some vacation time.

"Unfortunately," he said after recomposing himself, "I cannot allow that. For shopping, I can take you to the renowned San Cereza Street, which will surely satisfy your needs."

San Cereza Street was lined with luxurious stores well-frequented by the local nobility. Some even required customers to adhere to a dress code. An opulent place like that would surely appeal to the tastes of these young noble girls—and keep them occupied enough so they wouldn't run off when he looked the other way. A person could only take so much stress in one day.

"Shall we go, then?"

"Huh? But..." Bel glanced hesitantly at Citrina.

"*Shall we go*, then?" he said again, his tone making it clear that this was not a suggestion.

Finally, Citrina nodded, and they were on their way.

Oho ho ho, I'm holding hands with Bel!

The whole time they were out, Citrina made sure to have Bel's hand in hers. The sensation, though simple, delighted her to no end. It was, after all, a new experience. She'd never had a chance to hold hands with a friend and walk around, and watching her classmates stroll arm in arm around Saint-Noel had bred inside her a deep yearning to do the same. Now, she finally had her chance, and it was all thanks to Mia bringing her along on this trip. As a result, Citrina's loyalty toward Mia had shot up by a hundred and twenty percent.

Anyway, what was I thinking about, again? she thought, doing a bit of mental backtracking. *Oh, right. Open market and traveling merchants. Hm...*

Outwardly, she displayed her usual disarming smile. Behind that mask, however, her mind was busy digesting the information Connery had supplied.

A place where large numbers of unacquainted people gather... Sounds like the perfect place for Serpents to slither around.

The fundamental strength of the Chaos Serpents lay in their ability to hide among the populace and engage in sabotage. They could call in brute muscle when necessary, as was the case with the wolfmaster, but it was surely a limited resource. The vast majority of their agents did their work incognito, and this open market was the perfect refuge.

The wall guards don't seem all that bright either. It can't be that hard to slip past them...

"Shall we go, then?"

Connery's voice pulled her out of her thoughts, leaving her momentarily disoriented. She'd been paying the bare minimum of attention to what he was saying, and it took some effort to figure out what he'd meant by the question.

I vaguely remember him muttering something about a prince vanishing... I wonder what that was about? She made a mental note, figuring she'd probe him a little more about that later. *Now, what were we talking about again? Oh, yes, shopping. That'll work.*

She nodded. "Yes, let's go. Shopping along San Cereza Street sounds delightful, doesn't it, Bel?"

It actually did. Sure, it'd give her a chance to gather more information, but it'd also allow her to pick out clothes for Bel to try. And Bel could do the same for her! It didn't even matter if the clothes looked good. What was important was that they looked together, picked together, debated together, and laughed together—it was truly about the process. The peaceful passing of pricelessly purposeless time. To Citrina, that was worth more than anything else. The precise location of their shopping was, frankly, irrelevant.

"But if we go to the open market, we might find some rare mushrooms, right?" said Bel.

Connery frowned at this bizarre question. "Uh... Mushrooms?"

"Yes. Miss Mia loves mushrooms, so if there are any rare ones, I'd like to buy some for her."

"Ah, I see," he said, finding her follow-up explanation more sensible. "In that case, allow me to contact the cooks back at the residence."

Thus, thanks to Bel, a fine dish of mushroom cuisine was secured for dinner. What a thoughtful granddaughter.

Chapter 32: Request to Dine

By the time Mia returned to the Lampron residence, the sun had begun to set. She entered her room, and shortly afterward, Esmeralda and Ludwig paid her a visit.

"My, where has the time gone? I must have had a really long talk with Miss Rafina," Mia murmured.

Ludwig's eyes widened. "Lady Rafina is here?"

"Yes. To attend the upcoming ball, apparently. Abel's with her too."

"I see... Hm... With Lady Rafina..." A glint danced off his glasses, revealing a sharp gaze behind them. Mia jerked back a little. It was a little too sharp for comfort.

Uh-oh. I haven't given any thought to Esmeralda's marriage proposal or Sion's assassination. I spent all day eating and chatting with Miss Rafina! Okay, I need an excuse. Think, Mia, think...

After a concentrated moment of consideration, she came up with one.

"And, before you ask, I did manage to gain some information."

She'd received a verbal depiction of Count Lampron's character. That had to be worth something. Also, she'd learned how to make pot-steamed food using traditional earthenware. That was definitely a culinary technique unheard of in Tearmoon.

Those pot-steamed mushrooms were truly something! I'm so glad I learned how to make those!

If she explained the process to the head chef and had him research the technique some more, she might legitimately contribute to Tearmoon's food culture. That would be time well spent.

That's right, I didn't just eat and come back! I had a job to do, and I got it done!

After convincing herself that she hadn't just spent a whole day slacking off, she glanced at Ludwig.

"Ugh..." She groaned. The glance was a mistake.

"I see. A step ahead as always. Your Highness never fails to impress."

The unqualified admiration in his gaze stung her conscience, and she had to look away. “I fully agree with your approach,” he continued. “If we wish to regain initiative in this engagement, then we need more information. To that end, I have—and I do apologize for the short notice—arranged for dinner with King Abram this evening.”

“...Huh?” This sudden turn of events left Mia stunned. She was *not* ready to see the king.

Before she could even get a word of protest in though, Ludwig spoke again. “I believe it is crucial to probe the Sunkland king regarding his opinion of this marriage proposal.”

It certainly *was* crucial! There was literally nothing she could say to refute that!

“...I-I see. So, you decided to go ahead and arrange this dinner?”

“Yes. I contacted Prince Sion through Keithwood. The invitation also extends to Lady Esmeralda as Prince Echard’s potential consort. Miss Tiona, as Prince Sion’s classmate, will be allowed to attend as well.”

“My, Tiona too? Hm...” Mia glanced at Esmeralda.

“O-Oh, moons... Wh-What should I do, Miss Mia? My heart... It’s not ready for this...”

Mia would not find any reassurance in her friend, who looked even more flustered than her.

I’d feel a lot better if Ludwig and Anne came with me...but I doubt attendants will be allowed at a dinner session with the king. That means at worst, I might have to square off against him with Esmeralda as my only ally.

That wasn’t the most comforting thought. As a firm believer of the idea that “strength in numbers” described the best approach to tackling every problem in existence, she wanted as many people on her side as possible.

Then again, they’re the ones who brought this proposal up in the first place. They’re also letting me bring Tiona, which I’ll gladly do. Given that...

“I-I didn’t think I’d be meeting with him so quickly. Oh, my heart...” stammered Esmeralda.

Mia studied her increasingly nervous friend, somewhat surprised by the intensity of her reaction. As a rule, Esmeralda was used to getting her way, rules be damned. She could be speaking to a foreign king, and she’d still be

scoffing like usual. The girl had *nerve*. Well, that was how Mia saw her, at least.

The current Esmeralda, however, seemed to have lost all her edge.

I bet it's because the person she's seeing might become her father-in-law. Oh, come on, Esmeralda, get a grip!

With an assertive *hmph*, Mia proceeded to give her friend a pep talk.

"All right, listen here, Esmeralda. Who are you? You are a proud Etoile, daughter of Lord Greenmoon, one of Tearmoon's renowned Four Dukes, and you should conduct yourself accordingly. Your mere presence should strike awe into people, like... Like the Emerald Star! That yacht's a sight to behold, right? Be like the Emerald Star!"

"The...Emerald Star?"

Mia nodded, feeling particularly proud of her analogy.

Let's just ignore the fact that Mia had been decidedly unimpressed when she'd first laid eyes upon the vessel.

"I-I will, Miss Mia... I'll be like the Emerald Star!"

It seemed to work, though, judging by how it moved Esmeralda to tears.

Ugh, I wish someone would give me *a pep talk now...* After seeing Esmeralda off, Mia quickly had Anne help her change. Then, she sighed. *This whole thing is easier said than done...*

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

"Excuse us, Miss Mia."

"We're back, Your Highness."

The door opened to reveal Bel and Citrina.

"My, the two of you were out as well?"

Mia acknowledged them before quickly returning to her own thoughts. *I wonder what kind of person Sion's father is... I mean, he's* Sion's *father, so I've probably got my work cut out. I really hope I can get some useful information out of him...*

The king wasn't even the worst of her troubles.

"It's Prince Echard that's the real problem, isn't it..." she murmured.

Citrina's eyes sprung open in shock.

"You...already know, then. Wow..." she said, visibly impressed. "How should I proceed?"

Mia frowned. She had no idea what Citrina was talking about, but she'd

also been so focused on her own thoughts that she might have missed something Citrina had said. Not wanting to appear inattentive, she decided to go with “Hm, let’s say... I’ll leave it in your hands,” figuring it was probably along the lines of taking Bel to that market something or other.

She then leaned over and added in a whisper, “Honestly, our dear friend’s been looking a little bored lately, so go ahead and do your thing together if you want. I don’t particularly mind.”

Citrina’s skills were certainly invaluable, but it was later that they’d be needed, and even then more as a precaution than anything else. In the meantime, she figured she might as well keep Bel amused. Citrina, for her part, nodded soberly.

“Understood. It shall be done, or I’ll die trying...”

“Uh... Okay. That’s...a little intense, but sure.”

Mia looked at her somewhat uncomfortably, wondering what it was about Bel that got this girl so infatuated. She was going to take Bel out for some fun, or *die trying*? Weird.

Chapter 33: Aurelia Sirupis

“Wow... So this is Sunkland’s royal castle...” whispered an awestruck Anne as she gazed up the towering ramparts.

Its imposing architecture of solid stone looked entirely impervious to attack, but it didn’t stretch for very far. Even with Mia’s short strides, she could walk from end to end in under ten minutes. This reflected a philosophy of pragmatism that was almost the reverse of the Whitemoon Palace. The royal castle’s walls were not built for visual impact—they were erected as a military structure to repel invaders, and that purpose defined every aspect of their construction. They didn’t need to be long. They simply needed to be long *enough*.

“Hm, yes. That’s Solecsudo Castle. It’s my first time seeing it too, actually,” said Mia.

This was, in fact, her first time—previous life included—setting foot in Sunkland, and she was equally impressed by the sight of the royal castle.

Even from afar, it looks pretty majestic. I almost feel proud to be laying eyes on it, and I’m not even from Sunkland.

The presumptuous attitude of Sunkland nobles started to make more sense to her. She could see how the presence of such a magnificent structure would make people proud of their kingdom. Once the pride was there, it was only a small step to start believing that everyone would be better off basking in its glory.

“Hm?” Mia arched an eyebrow at Anne, who was still staring at the keep. “Is something the matter?”

“Oh, no... It’s just that... Hearing that it’s your first time here too makes me feel like this is a very special experience. Just getting to work in the Whitemoon Palace of the mighty Tearmoon Empire is already a miracle, and I’m also attending Saint-Noel Academy... Then you took me to the castle in Perujin, and now Sunkland too...”

Anne smiled, clearly moved by the thought. Mia nodded in agreement. “Yes, these probably aren’t the kinds of experiences someone living a

normal life would have."

In the previous timeline, Anne had probably spent her whole life in the Tearmoon capital. Maybe she'd have gone to a few places, but they'd all certainly be within the empire's borders. Now, she was walking around in Sunkland. She'd come a long way from home. A long way, Mia realized, from her family.

"Hey, um, Anne?" she said, suddenly worried. "Are you, uh...okay?"

"What do you mean, milady?" Anne asked, puzzled.

"It's been a while since you've seen your family, hasn't it? I know I asked you to come with me to Saint-Noel, but you don't have to follow me everywhere else. I'd appreciate it if you stayed with me when I'm in Belluga, but as for the rest of the time, if you get homesick, you're free to leave—"

"No, milady. Thank you, but that won't ever happen." Anne firmly shook her head. "Traveling with you is an honor, milady. I'm always proud to be by your side. Besides, I get to tell Elise all sorts of stories whenever I see her, and she loves it." She grinned. "So don't worry. Wherever you go, I'll be there with you. Always. Even if you tell me not to."

"Anne..." Mia let out a soft, resigned giggle. "Ah, of course you would. Because you're Anne. And I wouldn't have it any other way." She looked up at Solecsudo Castle. "All right, let's see what's in this place!"

Head held high, she strode proudly into the castle with Esmeralda and Tiona in tow. Sadly, her confidence would prove short-lived, ending not with a bang but a whimper as she came face to face with the king.

"Your Majesty, it is a pleasure to meet you. I am Mia Luna Tearmoon, princess of the Tearmoon Empire."

She and her friends greeted the king in his audience chamber. Each of them, Mia included, performed a much deeper curtsy than usual. Sunkland was Tearmoon's equal, and anything less than the highest degree of courtesy would be disrespectful. This was no problem for Mia, though. She was used to such occasions and promptly put on her flawless princessly smile.

"The pleasure is mutual, princess of Tearmoon. It is a long journey you have made, and I am grateful for it." The king of Sunkland, Abram Sol Sunkland, smiled.

Mia studied him. He seemed about the same age as her father, and he had a fine mustache that enhanced the intellectual aura of his gaze. His smile, though gentle at a glance, was subtly intimidating, and she felt an urge to shuffle uncomfortably.

S-So this is the king of Sunkland... He's certainly got the aura. Father isn't even half as daunting as him...

The very air around him somehow felt purer, more regal. Breathing it in caused Mia's head to spin.

Who could blame her? After all, Mia was part jellyfish. And not just any jellyfish, but a rare breed that lives in sugar water. She was an *aurelia sirupis*. *Aurelia sirupis* could not survive in freshwater. Or any water, seeing as they don't actually exist, but regardless...

Gah, get it together! This is no time to be shriveling up!

She smiled back, trying to channel the friend she had just had lunch with —the Holy Lady, Rafina. Rafina, she figured, wouldn't be daunted by this king. Rafina would remain her dignified self. Mia did her best impression.

"Please give my regards to your son, Prince Sion. He has been a most wonderful friend."

"I shall. Your superior wisdom seems, I've noticed, to have influenced him in a positive fashion, so I have been curious about your person. I am glad that the chance to meet you has come so soon." King Abram then turned to Tiona. "You must be Tiona Rudolvon. On behalf of my son, thank you for your work in Saint-Noel Academy's student council."

"Y-You're most welcome, Your Majesty." Caught completely off guard by his sudden mention of her, that was all Tiona could muster as a reply before bowing her head.

The king's gaze shifted again, moving past Mia to settle on Esmeralda.

"And you, I presume, are Lady Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon?"

"Y-Yes!" Esmeralda almost jumped.

Mia, on the contrary, felt a cool composure wash over her. Seeing that her friend was a bundle of nerves actually calmed her own. *Well then... I see that I'm the one who'll have to do all the heavy lifting here!*

Then, the heat came. Mia started to get fired up. She was going to *handle* this situation. Nervous Esmeralda was just as much of a handful as normal Esmeralda, but that only poured oil on the growing flame that was Mia's motivation.

Chapter 34: A Changing Heart

"I-It's an absolute pleasure to m-make your acquaintance, Y-Your Majesty."

Esmeralda's arms fell from her chest to her hips. Then, she lowered them farther. Finally, she pinched. With shaky fingers and the disjointed motion of a rickety old puppet, she performed a curtsy so nervous her whole skirt shook with her.

"I-I am the eldest daughter of House Greenmoon, and m-my name is Esmedal—"

This culminated in a magnificent flop in which she fumbled her own name. There was a brief silence, after which her head swiveled toward Mia. Tears welled in her eyes.

Oh, Esmeralda... Mia shook her head and sighed like a disappointed parent. *What a way to stumble on the big stage. Messing up your own name? Unbelievable. Let me show her how it's done.*

With utter aplomb, she opened her mouth.

"Allow me, Your Majesty. She is a relative of mine. An Etoiline, born to one of our empire's Four Dukes. Her name is Esmeralalda—"

And fumbled too!

"—Etoile Greenmoon!"

But through sheer gall, she forced her way through to the end of her sentence and smiled as if nothing had happened! It was, frankly, impressive. Mia, after all, was no spring chicken when it came to botching her lines. She was a seasoned botcher, a sinewy old bird who'd seen some droppings. A mere blunder of the tongue would not shake her.

"On behalf of my friend, I'd like to apologize for her behavior. She is still shaken by this sudden news of a marriage proposal, and I must ask for your understanding."

The king chuckled. "Be at ease. We are gathered today for a private event." He nodded at Esmeralda. "There is no need for excessive propriety, Lady Esmeralda. This is but a simple meeting to acquaint ourselves. I

would ask you to relax and enjoy a good meal."

King Abram smiled candidly, and the aggressively righteous aura about him diminished. Mia almost reflexively took a deep breath. It was as if he'd removed a piece of the thick shell that was his royal persona to reveal a glimpse of the human inside.

My, I didn't think he had it in him to smile like that. Seeing that he had a less intimidating side, Mia felt some of the tension in her muscles dissolve.

The same could not be said of Esmeralda. "A-As you command, Your Majesty. I-I will do exactly that."

She was as nervous as ever, so much so that it was making Mia uncomfortable.

Moons, Esmeralda. How are you such a wimp? Come on! Show some spine!

King Abram chuckled. "In any case, let us get on with the meal. We can talk as we dine."

With a look, he signaled the middle-aged butler beside him, who promptly stepped forward and gestured for the girls to follow. "This way, please."

They moved from the audience chamber to a nearby room. It was moderate in size—about half as large as a Saint-Noel classroom—and could fit at best a dozen people or so. The table at the center of the room was, interestingly, a round one. During formal dining sessions, it was custom to seat oneself in accordance with one's social standing. A round table made such distinction impossible. Just as the group stalled, unsure of where to sit, a new voice greeted them.

"Welcome, everyone."

It was soft and serene like autumn sunshine. The voice belonged to a plump, smiling woman with gray hair whose facial creases suggested she often wore her gentle expression. Soothed further, Mia felt the last remnants of her tension fade.

"Hello. It's nice to meet you. I am Mia Luna Tearmoon, princess of the Tearmoon Empire."

Next, Esmeralda and Tiona each greeted the lady, who listened and smiled at them in turn before introducing herself as the queen consort.

"Thank you all for taking such good care of Sion," she said, voice now imbued with the warmth of spring.

King Abram then stepped in with Sion and his brother. The younger prince had the same silver hair, neatly trimmed and beautifully brilliant. A long palisade of forelocks fell over his eyes, which peeked through the strands with timid caution.

"I think everyone here knows Sion well enough," said the king as he looked at Echard. "Come on, then. Go ahead and introduce yourself."

The young boy did as asked, stepping forward with a graceful bow. "Hello. My name is Echard Sol Sunkland."

He then fidgeted a little before managing an endearingly strained smile. It almost won Mia over right then and there.

My, he's so cute... Wait, no! She caught herself at the last moment. *He's the one behind Sion's assassination. I can't let my guard down!*

Forcing wariness back into her gaze, she studied him. She stared at his adorable haircut, then his adorable eyes, then the adorably puzzled tilt of his head...

Nope! He was too cute for wariness.

I mean, now that I think about it, there's no way a cute kid like him could be plotting an assassination. Chances are, he's being manipulated by that Lampron person...

"Ah, by the way, Princess Mia," said the king. "I heard from Count Lampron that you have a taste for mushroom cuisines, so I had one prepared today. It is only one dish, but I do hope you will find it to your liking."

"Have you! My, I can barely wait!"

You know what? Count Lampron sounds like a fine fellow. He probably has nothing to do with the incident. It'd be a terrible disservice to think of him as a culprit!

Mia had an immediate change of heart. She changed her heart so frequently that she should consider a career in cardiac surgery, honestly.

Chapter 35: Citrina's Pastime

"My, the two of you were out as well?"

Bel grinned and nodded at Mia's question. "Yes, and we learned about a really interesting place. It's called an open market."

Citrina listened to Bel report on their outing. As she did, she pondered how to make use of the information she'd gained.

A market that's freely accessible to all nearby merchants... There's probably a lot of sketchy traffic in and out, and Prince Echard vanished in a place like that. Briefly, but he did *vanish. That definitely raises some questions...*

If he'd simply gotten lost, it'd be fine, but what if he'd had an encounter with the Chaos Serpents? Feeling that the risk was too great to ignore, Citrina decided to ask Mia how to proceed. She waited until Bel finished her story and began strolling around the room before whispering into Mia's ear.

"Your Highness, about the open market, I was wondering how—"

"It's Prince Echard that's the real problem, isn't it...?"

Mia's mumbled response took the air out of Citrina's lungs. She stared in shock, feeling like her mind had just been read.

She...already knows?

True, it'd been a number of days since they'd arrived at the capital. That was enough time for her to have gathered this information of her own. Still...

For someone who made me swear not to tell anyone else, Connery sure isn't keeping a very tight lip.

Citrina recalled the face of the soldier who'd followed them on their trip. He looked like the kind of person whose hard work only earned him harder work. She felt a pang of worry for the man.

For most of her life, Citrina had kept all her relationships in emotional limbo. She could at any moment receive orders to kill a friend, so she'd made an effort to ignore any affection she'd felt for the people around her.

Mia, however, wasn't going to ask her to assassinate anyone. She'd said it loud and clear. With this restraint removed, Citrina naturally began to nurture friendships, returning kindness and concern to those who'd given the same to her. Connery, in particular, had helped her secure lots of frolic-with-Bel time. Frankly, it was harder to ask her not to be fond of him.

In any event...

"How should I proceed?"

Citrina unthinkingly asked Mia for instructions. That was how she'd always lived; ask for instructions and then carry them out. She'd done so for Barbara, and she'd done so for her father. Now, it was Mia giving the orders. That's all. Nothing else had changed. Most importantly, however reformed, she was still an ex-Chaos Serpent. She'd even tried to kill Mia. What say could she possibly have over her actions? All she should and could do was to obey Mia's orders.

That's what she'd thought, at least.

"Hm, let's say... I'll leave it in your hands."

Defying all her expectations, Mia instead ceded the decision. Mia was trusting her judgment. Trusting her with Serpent-related information. It was up to *her*.

"Understood. It shall be done, or I'll die trying..."

With emotions surging, Citrina met Mia's trusting gaze, felt the weight of duty on her shoulders, and bore it gladly.

Citrina snuck out of the Lampron residence, dodging the patrols using the information she'd gotten out of Connery.

Connery definitely needs a tighter lip. Before I leave, I should probably give him a lecture about keeping his mouth shut.

She walked down an alleyway with the certainty of a local. During her trip around town with Bel during the day, she'd already familiarized herself with the city's layout. Once she'd put some distance between herself and the residence, she lit a handheld lantern. An amber glow pushed back the surrounding night.

"All right... Let's do this."

She made her way toward the open market, slipping from alleyway to gloomy alleyway. For all its hustle and bustle, the streets of the royal capital were deserted at night. A few watchmen evaded, and she was already out of

District One, which neighbored the royal castle. As she pressed on, the towering structure sank into the background, and the scent of the air began to change. It smelled faintly of perfume. At times, she caught a stronger, more intoxicating whiff: hard liquor, the kind used to ply reluctant mouths and dejected minds. The night here reeked of danger. It was no place for a noble girl like her.

Unlike the man who appeared from the shadows. He very much looked like he belonged here.

"Hey now, what do we have here? How'd a little noble wander into this part of town?"

He walked into the glow of her lantern, revealing a badly scarred cheek and the grin of a ruffian. She stole a quick glance backwards. A second man had appeared behind her too.

"Heh heh heh, you shouldn't be out alone. It's dangerous here, you see? How 'bout you let me and my friend keep you safe from the baddies around town?"

He studied her wolfishly. Judging by how he picked her out as a noble with one glance...

A kidnapper on the hunt, or maybe a human trafficker... Connery was right. This area's a rough neighborhood.

Citrina made these observations without any hint of alarm. She wasn't much of a fighter, nor did she possess any more acrobatic talent than the average noble girl her age. Whatever assassination expertise she possessed, it wouldn't help her in this situation. The circumstantial evidence suggested that she *should* be terrified. But if that was the case, then why wasn't she?

That, you see, isn't even the right question. The first thing one should consider is why she was even carrying a lantern to begin with. Citrina was well aware that when moving in the dark, the weak should never carry a light. It would reveal the carrier, functioning as a lure for potential predators. Whatever bonus vision the lantern might grant would be useless even in a brawl. If there was sufficient moonlight to see, no lanterns should be used. So why did she hold one?

Well, she was, in fact, trying to lure in a predator. And not just any predator. One who probably knew this open market like the back of his hand, and could convince men like these two to spend the rest of the night unconscious in a ditch.

That's right. Mia had said so herself. Their dear friend had been looking a little bored lately, so she didn't mind if Citrina went ahead and did her thing together with said friend. Furthermore, this friend conveniently hadn't accompanied Mia to dine with the Sunkland king. If this were a puzzle, the clues would frankly be a little too obvious.

She'd done so on purpose. To keep her safe from danger. Mia had left Citrina her most powerful sword.

So, Citrina did nothing. She simply waited, trusting that the man's boredom would not allow him to sit idly by while the Yellowmoon girl snuck off in a most suspicious manner.

I know his kind. Ask them for help, and they refuse. Tell them to stay away, and they'll hound you all day long.

She had no evidence, no guarantee that she was right. She'd come here on conviction alone. Conviction, and a little bit of consideration—she'd brought a lantern to light his way.

"It's not very polite to keep a lady waiting, you know?" she declared into the empty gloom. "Or is this pair not even worth your time?"

"The hell are you going on about, girl?"

"I really hope it's not because you're some sort of sick person who's into watching girls like Rina get scared and cry."

"Who the hell are you talking— Augh!" The man let out a pained groan and fell over.

"Well, well, well... Looks like I played right into your bloody hands. That *really* rubs me the wrong way. Also, just for the record, I saw plenty of your tears at the Yellowmoon manor, and gotta say, didn't feel much. If I'm gonna make somebody cry, I'd much rather it be the princess. Watching her lose her head sounds way more fun."

From the darkness where the ruffian once stood appeared the man Citrina had been waiting for. The Empire's Finest, Dion Alaia, had arrived on the scene.

"Is that so? I'm sorry I couldn't satisfy your taste. Could I make it up to you with some conversation? I'm sure it'll at least keep your boredom at bay. I've been meaning to have a nice long chat with you." Citrina gave him one of her sweetest smiles with a cherry-like head-tilt on top. "You see, I noticed that you and Bel seem rather acquainted with each other, and I was wondering... What's the big idea, hm?"

Chapter 36: With a Heart Ninety-Seven Percent Pure

“On that note, Princess Mia... Belated though it may be, I would like to offer my formal apologies for the incident in the Kingdom of Remno. It is my understanding that my kingdom caused you a great deal of trouble.” King Abram lowered his head.

Mia quietly shook hers in response. “You owe me no apology, Your Majesty. The incident has passed, and any issues we had with Remno have been resolved. Prince Sion has already apologized to me as well. It is water under the bridge; let us not continue chasing it.”

“But...”

“I suffered no personal inconvenience, and Prince Sion’s help was indispensable in the incident’s resolution. There truly is no need for an apology.”

Her gracious attitude drew an affected sigh out of Abram.

“Very well. I’ve heard from Sion that Princess Mia of Tearmoon has a big heart. I see now that he is right.”

The queen consort seemed to share his admiration, and they both nodded approvingly. Needless to say, their evaluation was slightly off the mark. It wasn’t Mia’s heart that was big; it was her gut. Said gut was also very empty right now, and apologies weren’t going to fill it up. Her interest lay not in fault but food! Of the mushroom variety, preferably!

“Enough with the official matters, then. Let us dine. Due to the abrupt nature of this gathering, we were only able to prepare some simple dishes. I do hope they will be to your liking.”

At the king’s signal, dinner was served. It didn’t take long for Mia to realize that when he said “simple dishes,” he was being very, very modest.

“What a spectacular menu this is!” Mia let out a cry of delight as platter after platter of epicurean creations were set on the table, each a match for, if not superior to, the food served in the Whitemoon Palace. The Sunkland

bread, hot out of the oven, was perfectly baked. Known to go stiff over time, this type of bread was best eaten fresh to enjoy the crispy texture and mildly sweet aroma. Her personal favorite though, and arguably the show-stealing star of the whole meal, had come early with the appetizers.

"For the hors d'oeuvres, we have gelatin salad made of sunshine tomato and salt-fried champignons du soleil," the chef had explained before placing the dishes down.

For the former, red, ripened tomatoes were diced and made into an aspic. Clear and gelatinous, it resembled a jewel on the plate. Even more beautiful, however, were the champignons du soleil. A handful of mushrooms, each originally the size of Mia's palm, had been sliced into thin pieces, then fried with salt. That was all. The simplicity of the cooking process felt to her like a challenge from the chef.

No complicated handiwork, no flashy showmanship. I see what they're going for. The idea is to use the minimal amount of cooking to bring out the most of the ingredient's natural flavor.

Mia's eyes glinted with fascination. First, she picked up a nearby glass of water and moistened her taste buds. Next, she took her fork and, with graceful, deliberate motions, pushed its prongs into a slice of champignon.

An amateur would probably cut this slice of mushroom in two and put one half in their mouth. Not me though. As a veteran, I know the proper way to eat these.

The slice looked a tad too large to eat in one go. However, Mia knew better.

This was made by a chef willing to step into the ring with nothing but heat and salt. I refuse to believe no consideration was made for the experience of eating it.

Put simply, she'd come to the conclusion that this slice before her, however large it looked, had been carefully prepared not only to match the size of her mouth, but to be optimally tasty when consumed in a single bite. And so she picked up the slice and devoured it whole.

Tears of pleasure welled up in her eyes. She could taste the saltiness, faint but sufficient. It was the ideal amount to complement the mushroom's natural flavor, so plain yet so delicate. She felt like she'd tasted the richness of the earth itself. Biting down, she felt a supple resistance against her teeth. Chewing further, there was a soft crunch, and what a pleasing sound it was.

She kept going, and the flesh finally gave way. Neither stiff nor mushy, the mushroom had truly been fried to perfection. A scrumptious aroma then followed, tickling her nose. Finally, with the parting gift of a lingering sweetness on her tongue, the experience concluded.

"Exquisite... Absolutely exquisite work..." she said in a trancelike voice, visions of forests and slowly sprouting mushrooms filling her mind.

Mia the mushroom connoisseur gave the chef her utmost regard. Seeing her profound satisfaction, King Abram smiled.

"I had heard that the princess of Tearmoon had an extraordinary fascination with food. The rumor appears to be true."

"Oho ho, that is perhaps a little exaggerated, but I do admit I enjoy eating a great deal."

"Mostly true, then. Very well. I believe you also recently made a personal visit to Perujin?"

"Yes, that is correct. If a famine were to strike, Perujin would be a crucial source of food for us. I felt it imperative to establish with them a relationship of mutual trust."

A sharp twinkle flashed across Abram's eyes.

"Tell me something, Princess Mia. I was told by Sion that you predicted the current state of food insufficiency. Not only that, you also insisted that poor yields will continue for years to come, leading to a large-scale famine. Is this true?"

"The words were mine; that is true. As for their veracity, I do not know. What the future holds is anyone's guess. All I can say is that our empire has prepared for a famine. We have systems in place to ensure our people do not starve."

"I see... To tell you the truth, I have a number of retainers who suspect Tearmoon of stockpiling food for a war of territorial expansion."

"What? Father, that's ridiculous! Who said that?" protested Sion, visibly distressed by this revelation.

"Common sense would suggest," replied Abram, his tone even, "that the more likely explanation for such unusual behavior is not prophetic knowledge of the coming of history's greatest famine, but the preliminary signs of a military operation."

He looked at Mia, who replied in a tone so soft it was more thought than statement, "My, what a slaphappy mindset..."

“Oh? ‘Slaphappy,’ you say?” Abram arched a curious eyebrow.

“Yes. Slaphappy.”

Having lived the hell that was the great famine, she had no better word for the attitude being described. It was complacency of the highest order.

“War...” she continued. “In times of abundance, perhaps... But I hardly have the resources to waste on such nonsense when a famine is knocking on my door.”

Going to war right now was so senseless, it wasn’t even worth her time to consider. Some might suggest an invasion to secure more food, but no one would give up their land or crops for free. A war would raze valuable farms, kill countless workers, and leave everyone hungrier the ensuing year.

Granted, it might be worth it if we had such overwhelming strength that we could scare an opponent into surrendering before they get desperate and burn their fields...

Setting a hundred Dion Alaias loose on a nation, for example, might do the trick. She briefly amused herself with a mental picture of that playing out.

He’s already a one-man army, so that would be like sending a hundred armies. Actually, I’m not sure I could look at a hundred Dions all in one place and not pass out from sheer terror...

Ultimately, she was of the opinion that war was no solution for famine. Its utility was entirely transitory and served only to kick the can down the road. If it couldn’t solve the problem, then it wasn’t a viable option.

“With ample food and ample people, you can perhaps seek conquest and glory. But the coming era is one of hunger and scarcity. This is no time for war. We cannot afford to be killing people and ruining fields right now.”

A thought suddenly occurred to her, and she added, “Oh, but using that as an excuse could be very useful.”

“An excuse? Using what as an excuse?”

“Using what I just said. Tell your people that the Tearmoon Empire might be planning an invasion. Use that as a pretext to start stockpiling food. That, Your Majesty, is my honest advice for you.”

“Fascinating... So you are certain, Princess Mia, that a famine is coming,” the king said, nodding. “But in that case, this should be a busy time for you. How is it then that you brought yourself here to Sunkland? Is there something even more urgent?”

“Why yes, there certainly is...”

An unexpected opportunity just presented itself, and Mia took a moment to consider how she should leap at it. This was the perfect chance to learn more about what kind of person Prince Echard was and what motives lay behind Sion’s assassination. She couldn’t spill *all* the beans, of course, but fortunately, she had an excuse to spill just enough to get the ball rolling.

“I am here...because one of my best friends, Esmeralda, has received a marriage proposal, and I felt the need to ascertain the quality of her potential groom,” she proudly declared.

Her voice rang pure and clear. There was no guilt, no deception. It was the truth. It just...wasn’t the *whole* truth. A part of her truly did care about Esmeralda. Whatever other motivations she might harbor, they couldn’t be more than, say, three percent of the whole. The margin of error on that number might be in the many dozens, but whatever. Three percent it was. Therefore, in that moment, Mia’s heart was as pure as a jellyfish was water —ninety-seven percent.

Chapter 37: One Of My Best Friends - One Of = Best Friend?

Wow, so that's the person Sion goes to school with... The Great Sage of the Empire, Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon...

Echard was floored by the maturity and composure with which she conducted herself. She'd handled an apology from the king with grace and then started dining immediately after as if nothing had happened.

Most people would be lucky not to vomit if they had to eat with father watching them. How does she stay so calm?

Echard had never been abroad. To him, the Kingdom of Sunkland was effectively the world, and its king was the highest authority in existence. Of all the people he'd seen dine with his father, no one had been perfectly at ease. Some degree of palpable tension was always present. For nobles like Count Lampron who valued tradition, it went further, bordering on some form of reverence. Even Echard, the king's own son, would sometimes shrink away from his intimidating aura.

But look at her. She's just...eating. And enjoying it! As if this were any other meal!

His surprise would soon turn to amazement as the conversation proceeded.

"To tell you the truth, I have a number of retainers who suspect Tearmoon of stockpiling food for a war of territorial expansion."

His father, the King of Sunkland, might as well have drawn a blade with that statement. It was a clear challenge, and not a friendly one. Mia parried it with a simple response—that it was a slaphappy mindset.

To her, talk of war was *slaphappy*. She'd meant it too. There was not a shred of doubt in her voice or demeanor.

The Great Sage of the Empire... Count Lampron always grumbled about how the Wind Crows incident was merely a string of coincidences, but...

Echard snuck a quick peek at his father's expression. He saw curiosity and

goodwill. *Father thinks pretty highly of her...*

This was the person his brother Sion considered a friend. Sion, with all his gifts and talents, thought her wise and afforded her his unqualified praise. Sion...was probably correct. Echard had just gotten a taste of her intellect and wit firsthand.

It made him grimace. His inferiority complex welled up like a dark ooze, filling his mind and heart. With a despondent sigh, he looked away, shifting his gaze toward another girl at the table.

And this...is my soon-to-be fiancée... he thought, regarding the bundle of nerves that was Esmeralda.

"She belongs to one of Tearmoon's Four Houses. Her status as an Etoiline is a fine match for Your Highness."

That was what Count Lampron had proudly declared to him. Objectively, it was true. Once Sion inherited the throne, Echard would doubtlessly be granted the title of duke, making them equal in rank.

"At eighteen years of age, she is admittedly a fair bit older, but I nevertheless believe she will be an excellent consort."

As one of exalted blood, the bearing of heirs was an ever-important duty. To that end, a gap of eight years was certainly an undesirable factor. Even so, political interests often resulted in these kinds of lopsided marriages being arranged. Such was marriage for royalty. Echard had been taught this growing up, and he'd already accepted it as a fact of his life. His potential bride being a much older girl did not particularly bother him. However...

The flustered Esmeralda, when next to Mia's poise, made for a stark sight. The way she all but cowered like a small, terrified animal was, frankly, a little pathetic. In fact, even the third girl, Tiona Rudolvon, carried herself with more dignity. To be so faint of heart that the daughter of an outcount seemed unflappable in comparison...

Echard bit his lip.

If this were Sion's marriage, would anyone have deemed her worthy?

The thought invited itself into his mind. The person selected as his brother's consort would doubtlessly be someone overflowing with intelligence and courage. Someone like that Princess Mia... He knew it was wrong to compare like this, to think of a sibling in terms of better or worse. But he couldn't help it.

Sion has it all... Was born with it all, then given more. On the other

hand, I... What chance do I have?

Words once whispered in his ear echoed in his mind.

"Listen, it doesn't have to be flashy. Just a little prank. To show him up. Put him in his place. It's for his sake, honestly. No one can put up with perfection. Dent his image a little. It'll do him good."

Spoken in a soft, sweet, almost serpentine voice...

"Here, take this drug and slip it in his drink or something. It just makes the gut hurt a bit. Nothing serious. I know what you're thinking, but just hold onto it for now, okay? Look, if you change your mind after I leave, just throw it away. No harm done."

They'd long slithered into his heart. Just then...

"I am here...because one of my best friends, Esmeralda, has received a marriage proposal, and I felt the need to ascertain the quality of her potential groom."

A crystalline voice pierced through his gloomy rumination. He looked toward it to find the radiance of the moon itself.

She considers her *a dear friend...*

No matter how he looked at the sorry sight that was Esmeralda, he couldn't see how she was in any way worthy of being a friend of the Great Sage of the Empire. And yet that hadn't stopped Mia from declaring so. The princess was here to appraise the person who might marry Esmeralda. She'd come all this way for her friend. Suddenly, the world seemed to split in two. In one, showered with light, stood the chosen ones in all their confident glory. In the other, mired in shadow, crouched the not-haves huddling their pity.

Craaaack!

He felt like he heard the sound of splintering glass. The blazing brilliance of his brother and this young sage had finally melted the last latch in his heart. The dam broke. Out flooded defeat, and with it, scorn.

The world went silent, save for one echoing phrase...

"Put him in his place. It's for his sake, honestly."

Oooh... I-I can't anymore... I feel sick...

Meanwhile, Esmeralda was about to pass out from anxiety. Her timid heart started racing the second she'd felt the king's daunting presence, and it hadn't stopped ever since. The meal might as well have been plates of

sand for all she knew. She could barely remember where she was, never mind what she was eating. Fear, uncertainty, and confusion pressed on her chest, robbing her of her breath.

Oh no... I think I'm about to faint...

Just as the last straw of composure she'd grasped was about to snap, she heard Mia's voice.

"I am here...because one of my best friends, Esmeralda, has received a marriage proposal, and I felt the need to ascertain the quality of her potential groom."

Her heart skipped a beat. Had her ears tricked her? No, she'd definitely heard it. Mia had said "best friend."

That's right, I'm... I'm Miss Mia's best friend!

That thought, like a fresh morning gale, blew away the musty haze in her mind. Suddenly, she remembered who she was and what she was here to do.

For shame! Get a grip on yourself, Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon! You're a proud Etoiline, the eldest daughter of your house, and most importantly, Miss Mia's best friend. This is no time to be making a fool of yourself!

She got a grip on herself—literally, by holding herself at the hips with arms akimbo. Then, she looked, possibly for the first time, at the person who might become her husband.

My, what a cute face he has. He looks quite clever too. I wonder why he's staring into space like that... It must be because he's shy! Oh, how adorable. I must say, this boy has some serious potential. One day, I bet he'll be as handsome as his brother!

Esmeralda, lover of good looks, was back in action!

Chapter 38: Esmeralda, Lover of Good Looks, and Mia, Lover of Good Food

Hm, how should I proceed...?

Mia mulled over her options. She needed to find out more about Echard's motives, but what was the best way of going about it? Asking him whether he hates Sion or is thinking of slipping poison into a drink in the near future was probably not going to work. While she pondered, the Tearmoon team's self-appointed front woman Esmeralda had already begun to make her first move.

"My, Prince Echard, are those mushrooms not to your liking?"

Her face, once pale with dread, had regained its color. In fact, it seemed even rosier than usual.

Oh? Has Esmeralda finally gotten back into her groove?

Mia felt a sense of relief. Esmeralda was her ally, and she'd proudly insisted so despite knowing that this arrangement with Sunkland was likely a sign of her house making a play for the throne. That was enough for Mia to trust her and, after a moment's consideration, leave this entire matter in her hands. Esmeralda could be a tad unreliable at times, but priorities had to be managed. This food, for example, wouldn't stay hot forever. Eating it came first.

Now, in spite of Mia's unflattering assessment, Esmeralda was actually pretty good with people. Having received a noble's education, she could inject a fair bit of wit into her conversations. While not Mia's match, she was also a decent dancer, capable of doing a twirl or two without embarrassing herself. On top of that, she had one more tool at her disposal, and that was her experience with men. Boys, rather. Growing up around little brothers had endowed her with an unconscious ability to befriend young boys with ease. She had the eye of a master sculptor when it came to assessing them, and she used her skill to full effect. Within seconds, she

found an opening—the mushrooms that inconspicuously lay untouched at the edge of his plate.

Plenty of kids have trouble eating mushrooms with peculiar flavors. My little brothers are the same. Picky little rascals...

In case anyone's wondering, if Mia had been the one who noticed this, she'd have said, "Oh, what a waste. Here, I'll eat them for you." Just saying.

Using a distaste for a certain food as a starting point, Esmeralda proceeded to build rapport, turning the conversation toward foods he did like, which she'd then use as a springboard for further topics. Talk of seafood could be channeled into a captivating description of seawater bathing. Mentions of red meat could lead to discussion of exotic dishes abroad.

As a house of diplomats, the Greenmoons had an intimate understanding of the value of information. They believed that no knowledge could be gained in vain, and even pointless trivia could be weaved into conversations to add color and arouse interest. By seasoning their dialogue with a mix of topics both familiar and new to the listener, they made themselves expert communicators, and Esmeralda had mastered this skill.

Her opener, however, did not quite elicit the reaction she'd expected. Echard, in response to her question, took a quick glance at Sion before shaking his head.

"No, they're fine... I don't really mind them," he said as he popped one into his mouth.

Oh? How curious. Did I misjudge him? Esmeralda frowned. Perhaps he was the type to leave his favorite for last. *No, but... Hmm...*

She trusted her eyes, and they'd definitely seen reluctance in his. What was going on?

Again, in case anyone's wondering, Mia was the type to eat her favorite food first. Then, after devouring everything else on her plate, she'd ask for another helping of it. In other words, she started *and* ended with her favorite! That was the Mia method.

Thank you for reading this entirely meaningless passage that only served to illustrate her gluttonous habits. Back to the story.

Echard's cheeks undulated. Presumably, he was chewing. This went on for some time before finally swallowing with an effortful gulp. This redoubled Esmeralda's confidence in her assessment. The boy *definitely* didn't like mushrooms.

"What do you like eating, then?" she asked.

"I have no preference. Anything that our farmers put their heart and soul into growing—anything that received the blessing of the earth—should be and will be eaten."

The indifference with which he said this shocked her. Most noble children had pampered upbringings, resulting in self-centered personalities. The more egregious ways in which this manifested would often be stamped out in adolescence, but picky eating was not deemed too problematic an issue and was often left uncorrected. Echard's answer was about as far from self-centered as one could get. She found this incongruous display of maturity astonishing. And endearing.

Mm hm hm... I see what's going on here. He's trying to look like a big boy. Oh, how adorable.

Her interest in the young prince steadily grew.

Meanwhile, Mia's opinion of the exchange was...

Well, I'm glad Esmeralda got her nerves under control, but now I'm a little worried she's becoming too much like her usual self. I hope she hasn't forgotten why we're here. Honestly, I don't mind how she's into cute boys and stuff, but she shouldn't let it distract her from more important— Oh, moons, is this ever delicious... Mmm... What was I thinking about again?

They were both lovers of objects disparate, but nature alike.

Chapter 39: Have You Noticed, by the Way?

Now, for a change of pace and backdrop...

The night was dark, and the alleyway darker. Standing in its shadow, Citrina began interrogating the man with a mark on his cheek the shape of Dion's fist. The other man, for the record, had received similar treatment from Dion but failed to remain conscious, sparing him the ensuing questioning.

Her victim was entirely unbound, but fear—or perhaps pain—had robbed him of the use of his legs. He sat helplessly on his rear as she slowly walked up.

"All right, I think you know the drill. Let's hear what you have to say," she said as she brought her face close.

She smiled, and the man all but squealed. He then shot a reproachful gaze at his dormant partner. Had they both remained awake, it'd at least have been a coin toss to decide who gets interrogated.

Dion, seeing this reaction, beamed. "Yeah, you sure lucked out, didn't you?"

"...What?"

"Well, since you're the only one awake, I can't beat you senseless. If both of you were awake, I could make an example outta one of you to get the other to talk." Dion leaned in and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Would you like to be the example instead? I can wait for your buddy to wake up."

This time, the man *did* squeal.

"Dion Alaia, could you be a little less aggressive please?" Citrina cautioned while somehow keeping her smile unchanged. "If you scare him too much, it will make the tortur— I mean, it will make the *questioning* less effective."

She said this in the sweetest of voices. It chilled the man to the bone.

Who, he wondered through the haze of terror, was this girl? And how did she remain so calm standing next to this man who had the aura of someone who chopped heads off as a hobby?

It was human nature to fear the unnatural, and this girl...was just that. The feeling he got from her, it was similar to running into a breathtakingly beautiful woman...in the middle of a graveyard at midnight. In a tavern, it'd be a delight. At a graveyard, it was pants-wetting. Sadly, this realization had come too late. Had he properly considered the dissonance of a noble girl strolling casually through a dangerous part of town at night, none of this would have happened. Alas, hindsight offers no cure to regret. He now had to face a smiling Citrina, whose voice grew increasingly melodious.

"Tell me, you're one of those bad people who specialize in human trafficking or kidnapping, right?"

"U-Uh, no, I—"

"Tee hee, it's okay. You don't have to pretend. Lies and excuses will only waste time. Both yours and mine. Whether you're guilty of those crimes is, frankly, not my concern right now. I do admit I'm slightly curious about what you were planning to do to Rina, but I'll make a special exception and ignore that," she said, holding her fingers to her cheek in an adorable fashion.

Then, her smile vanished. "What I'm concerned about right now...and what you should also be concerned about...is how you can be useful to Rina. Do you have any ideas?"

Her head at the height of his chest, she looked up at his face. Her large and unblinking gray eyes made him gulp.

"I suggest you think very very carefully before answering." Her smile suddenly returned, and she began to speak in a slow, didactic tone. "To give you some help, let Rina just mention that Prince Echard wandered into this area not long ago, and I'm currently looking for the people he spoke to. If you happen to have some idea who they might be..."

"I-I don't—"

"And I'm such a nice person that I'll even warn you again. The last thing I want to hear is 'I don't know.' If you don't know, then you'd better tell me who does...or I won't have any reason to be nice to you anymore."

Her smile grew even sweeter, and the man let out a desperate shriek as his face paled.

“Now then, it’s time for an answer. Would you happen to know the people who spoke to Prince Echard?” she asked in a voice that suggested she was very much enjoying the exchange.

“Hmm... A man with an Equestrian accent... I wonder if he’s still hiding somewhere nearby,” Citrina murmured after wrapping up her interrogation. “Probably not... But just in case, maybe...”

“Sorry to butt into your conversation with yourself, but what do you want me to do with these two?” asked Dion, looking down at the two bound men at his feet.

“Mmm, good question. I’m not a Sunkland noble, so I honestly couldn’t care less about policing this capital. But Bel’s here right now, and I don’t want her to run into any trouble, so let’s notify some castle guards,” she said before striking her palm. “Oh, forget that! More importantly, what’s *your* deal with Bel, hm? With the way she talks about you, you’d think the two of you were best buddies or something.”

Dion arched an eyebrow. “I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again. I have no idea what you’re talking about. I mean, I know the girl, but that’s about it.”

That lined up with the information Citrina had gathered. Moreover, Dion Alaia wasn’t exactly the trusting sort. Given his personality and the fact that Bel’s origin was something of a mystery, he’d be keeping an extra eye on her if anything. There was no way he’d be *buddy-buddy* with her.

That was all circumstantial evidence, though, and circumstantial evidence meant nothing to her right now. She had her friend’s word of mouth. To Citrina, there could be no greater truth. Consequently, anything Dion said that ran counter to Bel’s claims, no matter how credible it sounded, could only be false. This led her to view his current manner in a most suspicious light.

“Ah, you’re going to play dumb, huh...? That can only mean there’s something you’re trying to hide. What is it? Oh no, don’t tell me...” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Dion Alaia. You’re one of those people who likes young girls, aren’t you? And you’re after Bel.”

“Bah ha ha. Oh, please. Twenty is where I draw the line,” he said, brushing off her allegation. “They say iron sharpens iron, and people sharpen their friends. As for me, I prefer to be whetted by a girl of steel.

After all, there's no fun crossing a dull blade. If we're gonna dance, let it be on a knife's edge. Sorry to break it to you, but to that end, you, the princess, and the Greenmoon girl are all the same to me. If you want my affection, you'll need far tougher mettle."

"...We *are* talking about the same thing, right? Romance and relationships? Why do I feel like you're trying to chop somebody's head off instead?"

"Hey, passion is passion, right? Who cares which blade it's told through?"

"...You don't have many friends, do you?" said Citrina, disgusted.

Dion eyed her, then shrugged. "Not many, but probably more than you, little miss *Yellowmoon*."

As soon as he said that, Citrina's expression went completely flat. She looked down at the ground. "I don't care. I have Bel. That's enough."

Dion scratched his head awkwardly, aware that he'd touched on a sensitive subject for the girl.

"Yeaaah, I mean, I get you. One soul mate is good enough. Friends though, it doesn't hurt to have more of those. And there's no rush, so...just take your time finding 'em. Might as well, now that you're not chained by your family anymore," he said, sneaking an oblique glance in her direction before looking away again.

Citrina gave him an astonished stare. "Dion Alaia. You devious man. Were you hiding a heart under that murder-happy persona all this time?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, and it beats too. I just don't wear it on my sleeve."

"Well, maybe you should sometimes. A bit of candor goes a long way with kids. And you're pretty good with them, it seems. Are you sure you don't want to consider becoming a teacher or something?" Citrina said in a teasing tone.

He grimaced. "Hell no. Unless you're trying to bore me to death."

"Really? I think it'd be a pretty good match for you. Especially if you're doing it under Her Highness. Boredom doesn't last long with her involved."

He tried to retort her quip, came up empty, scrunched up his face, and shook his head.

Incidentally, did anyone notice that in his list of young girls, he'd

mentioned one who was definitely over twenty—on the inside, anyway?

Chapter 40: Slurp! This Is...Poison?!

Just as Mia was about to dig into the main dish of the meal, a steaming platter of Sunkland beef tenderloin, she realized something.

Wait... Wasn't I supposed to be gathering information?

She hadn't done so in the slightest. Ludwig had worked hard to give her this opportunity, and wasting it would be unwise. It was time to get some actual work done. Thus, she took a piece of tenderloin and placed it in her mouth. A luscious sauce, its flavor and aroma enriched by the natural juiciness of the meat, delighted her tongue and nose. She savored the experience, then repeated it again with a second piece. When the plate was half-finished, she finally turned her attention from the food to her surroundings. Well, maybe about twenty percent of her attention.

Hm, it looks like Esmeralda is doing her part of the information-gathering pretty well. She's really going in on Prince Echard. I guess I should approach from a different angle.

Someone here must have some vital information about Sion's potential assassination, and she was going to get it. With her resolve hardened, she finished the other half of her tenderloin before using a slice of bread to scoop up the remaining sauce. Sauce was love. Sauce was life. For chefs, sauces were the culmination of their skill set, distilling their entire expertise into pure, liquid gratification. Slurping up every last drop was Mia's way of showing respect.

Anyway, with matters of dubious culinary courtesy resolved, she promptly went after Sion. "I must say, Prince Sion, I'm a little sad that you kept me entirely in the dark about this whole thing between your brother and Esmeralda. I expected a little more candor."

Sion smiled wryly. "I apologize for any hurt feelings, but it's news to me as well. I only heard about it very recently."

"My! You didn't know either?"

That sounded like an important piece of information! Sensing an opening, Mia's eyes widened with interest...

Wait a minute.

...Then shrank again.

That's not surprising at all. This marriage was arranged as a political counterweight against me and Sion. Of course they wouldn't tell him in advance. But hm, I wonder if he's aware of Count Lampron's involvement and the implications of that. If he knows what the count's goal is, that would mean he's letting this marriage proceed on purpose...

She chewed on the thought some more. It tasted pretty good. Like bread. In fact, it *was* bread. And the chewing was literal. Regardless, she came to the conclusion that there was no way Sion could be in the dark about the goings-on. Her reasoning? Because the whole thing had been kept a secret. This was Sion, after all. Perfection on legs. His own brother might be getting married, and he hadn't been told in advance. Was she to believe that he'd just scratch his head and shrug after learning about such a blatant political maneuver against him?

No way. He's definitely looked into it, and he's either letting it happen on purpose, or has no choice but to let it happen. Hmm... What's King Abram's take on this, I wonder?

She turned toward the king. "In any case, this marriage between Prince Echard and Esmeralda will certainly strengthen ties between Tearmoon and Sunkland, yes?"

"Indeed. It delights me to know that our nations will be brought closer." He smiled amicably. "It is good for us, and likely good for the continent as a whole. If this great famine you speak of truly comes to pass, then all nations must join hands against its threat. Only then can we do our duty toward our people."

Mia smiled back. "I am honored to have my words taken in good faith."

Not even a second after finishing the sentence, she felt a strange sensation. *Oh? How odd... My tummy feels a little...*

It came hard and fast, striking her right in the abdomen. It felt like...a stomachache. She looked up with a gasp, realizing the implications, and licked her lips, which tasted of sauce. Sauce rich enough to mask other flavors. A chill ran down her spine.

Is... Is this poison?!

No. It was just good old indigestion from overeating. Let there be no

doubt that her impending suffering was the doing of nothing but her own failure at portion control.

That's right. All that previous talk about her gut was a lie! She was neither bighearted nor big-gutted! The only thing big about her were her delusions of the bigness of her organs. Though she believed her stomach to be infinitely capable of accepting food so long as it was delicious, that was ultimately no more than subjective opinion. The existence of a volumetric limit for her stomach was an objective truth that could not be circumvented. Said stomach had already accepted a good deal of food during her luncheon with Rafina. Now, hit with an even greater load for dinner, it had finally tapped out and raised the pain flag.

Also, it wasn't that the thought of *"Uh-oh, I might have eaten too much"* hadn't crossed Mia's mind. Her brain had just chosen escapism as a defense against shame. She'd rather blame her episode on a bit of poison than gluttony.

The problem was that stomachaches, well, *ached*, and no amount of mental escapism could allow her to escape from the actual pain she was beginning to feel. The cause could be blamed on many things—poison, excess, whatever—but the progression was singular.

Ugh, having to go to the privy in the middle of a formal dinner is a terrible faux pas, but—ow, ow, ow!—I have no choice.

With tragic resolve, she rose from her seat.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I'll need to be excused for a few moments."

With a graceful curtsy, she quickly shuffled out of the dining room. With directions obtained from a maid waiting outside in the hallway, she promptly made her way toward her destination.

After finishing her business and stepping out of the privy, a young man approached her.

"Princess Mia..."

With his dark hair and fine looks, it was none other than Sion's attendant, Keithwood.

"My, Keithwood? What's the matter?"

Her puzzlement was met with an extremely sober look. "There's something I thought you should know... But before that, have you managed

to contact Ludwig?”

Huh? What was that about Ludwig?

She was just about to respond with a perplexed frown when it struck her. Keithwood thought she’d slipped out to give instructions to Ludwig. That was good. Her response, however, was a bit tricky. An obvious lie might make him suspicious. In an effort to keep him from happening upon the actual and embarrassing reason of having eaten her own gut into submission, she fudged her answer.

“Oho ho, please. You know me. I’d never do such a thing,” she said in the kind of ambiguously suggestive tone that frankly could be taken to mean pretty much anything.

This elicited a nod. “Ah. Very well. We’ll leave it at that.”

“More importantly, what did you want to tell me?”

“Yes, about that... There’s something you should know about Prince Sion and Prince Echard...” he said, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

Chapter 41: A Doozy of Information from Keithwood

"This is just a hunch, but would you happen to be wondering what Prince Sion thinks of this marriage proposal?"

"My, how shrewd of you. I certainly am."

If information could be hunted, Mia would have smelled blood right then and there. Keithwood was Sion's closest vassal, and one of the few people with whom he could speak his honest thoughts. In other words, Keithwood could be a treasure trove of important information.

Sion doesn't look like the type to have a lot of friends. I wouldn't be surprised if Keithwood is the only person he can be honest around...

To what would have been Sion's profound annoyance, Mia actually felt a little sorry for him. "I assume Sion is aware of the politics behind this situation?"

Keithwood nodded. "Yes. He is aware that Count Lampron intends to create, through a union between Prince Echard and the House of Greenmoon, a strong political axis to oppose the combined influence of Prince Sion and yourself."

"Hmm... So what does Sion think about all this?"

"I haven't asked him directly, but I doubt he threw his hands up in support of the notion."

"That's hardly surprising. It's strengthening his political opponents, after all."

"Indeed. However, I also doubt he'll openly oppose the arrangement."

"Oh? And why is that?"

Keithwood grimaced. "Siblings...are complicated. As I'm sure you're aware, His Highness is an exceptional individual. His exceptionalism is apparent in his swordsmanship, of course, but it also encompasses his intelligence, his grace, his courage, and his willingness to uphold what is right and just. He possesses every quality required of a king. As an heir to

the throne, he is, very literally, perfect."

Hearing such unbridled praise for Sion made Mia want to throw in an unflattering quip or two for balance, but his compliments were watertight. Rather, they were all *true*. Sion did indeed possess all the qualities that would make for a virtuous king.

"And then there's Prince Echard, who grew up constantly being compared to his brother."

Mia almost uttered an expletive out loud. *Oh, the poor kid. I feel so sorry for him. Having Sion as a brother... Moons, what a terrifying thought!*

So terrifying was the thought that she couldn't help but simulate it in her mind with a morbid fascination.

"Sion, I made some tea. Would you like some?"

"Ah, my dear sister Mia. As lovely and considerate as always. Certainly, I'll have some tea."

"Oh, and can you help me with my homework? I don't get how to do this part..."

"Of course. Let's see..."

"...Hm? Is it just me, or does having Sion as a brother actually not sound half bad?"

Maybe having an exceptionally talented and, in particular, exceptionally handsome older brother was a good thing. Mia was no Esmeralda, but she wasn't immune to the effects of a pretty face either.

Oh, but in my case, I think I'd have to imagine him as a sister. What would it be like if I had an older sister like Sion...

Simulation, round two. This time, replace the outside with Esmeralda, but keep the inside the same.

"Mia, my dear sister, I'm considering building a hospital in the slums as my next project. What do you think?"

"My! I think that's a wonderful idea."

"Also, I'm thinking we should build a school for the people as well. What do you say?"

"I say, yes! You have nothing but good ideas, Esmeralda!"

“That sounds...amazing!”

All she had to do was say “yes” to every question, and all the problems would effectively solve themselves. That was literally Mia’s ideal life! Suddenly, she felt a pang of envy toward all the people in the world who had highly competent older siblings.

Hmm, in that sense, having Sion as an older brother doesn’t sound too bad... But it might be tough if Prince Echard has a competitive personality and hates losing. Also, I guess he’s still young. Unlike me, he doesn’t have the level of maturity necessary to understand how lucky he is. You need a big heart to see past the bad and appreciate the good, after all, and that comes with age.

Again, bigness, delusions, et cetera, et cetera.

“His Highness has been watching Prince Echard his whole life. He sees his pain, and knows how much being compared hurts him...”

“I see. What do they call this again? The curse of the gifted, or something along those lines?”

It was a sentiment Mia struggled to empathize with. Frankly, it seemed like the kind of problem that was a luxury to have. Nonetheless, she did understand that privileged or not, for the person grappling with the problem, it was no less distressing.

“And then,” Keithwood continued, “a marriage is arranged for his poor little brother. The bride is the daughter of a Tearmoon Duke. The age gap is large, but her status is more than sufficient. Furthermore, it’s a union that would benefit Sunkland’s interests. How is he supposed to say no to something like that?”

“I see... That certainly is a complicated issue.” Mia sighed. Now that she understood his circumstances, she couldn’t blame him for keeping quiet. Even a bit of well-meaning advice might be taken the wrong way.

“Isn’t it a little early for you to be getting married?”

“What, you think you’re some kind of hotshot because you’re getting married before me, you little punk?”

“Look at yourself. You’re worse than me in every way. What makes you think you’re good enough for her?”

From mild concern to vicious debasement, inferiority complexes have a way of magnifying the unintentional barbs in others’ words. At times, those suffering would fabricate entirely baseless fantasies to victimize

themselves. Sion knew better than to give his brother the fodder.

"Even if he spoke up against it, he'd be suppressing political opposition against him," she murmured musingly.

He'd effectively be acting out of personal interest. He couldn't possibly dismantle a promising offer of marriage for his brother to bolster his own political position.

"But what does King Abram think? I can't imagine it's as simple as, 'It delights me to know that our nations will be brought closer,'" Mia said, mimicking the king's tone.

"I do believe that's part of it, at least. There are those who see Tearmoon stockpiling food and suspect you of planning an invasion. This would allow His Majesty to keep such claims in check."

"I see. A marriage involving the Greenmoons would be a powerful argument against the invasion argument."

Keithwood nodded solemnly. "Another part of his calculation, I think, is to place a member of the royal family near Count Lampron and his posse of conservative nobles."

"Hm, hm." Mia folded her arms and mulled over this deluge of information.

"That's all the information I can provide," Keithwood concluded somewhat hesitantly.

She smiled at him. "That's perfectly fine. You've been a great help. Though, are you sure it's okay for you to reveal to me so much about the royal family's internal affairs?"

He shrugged. "I was hoping you'd help us fix this slight dysfunction in the royal family. We vassals alone find our power...limited. Which is why I've come to you to request the wisdom of the Great Sage of the Empire."

"My! Well, that wisdom isn't going to come cheap, you know? I hope you have some sort of worthy compensation in mind," she said, her playful grin eliciting a wry one from him.

"Very well. In that case, allow me to offer an additional piece of information, and this one's a doozy. The royal chef said that dessert for today might be the best work he's ever done."

"My! That's..." Mia rubbed her tummy. "Certainly a worthwhile piece of information!"

She swiftly returned to her seat at the table.

Chapter 42: Miabel...Is Brainwashed

"All right, Miss Bel. This will be your homework for tonight," Ludwig said as he held out a piece of parchment.

Bel gave him a puzzled look. She wasn't sure why, but he seemed to be in a rush.

"Um, Professor Ludwig, are you going somewhere?" she asked in an innocently curious voice.

He grimaced. "Please, stop it with the 'Professor.' You're right, though. I will be heading out soon." He paused for a second. "Speaking of which, where is Miss Citrina?"

"Oh, she went out too. I'm the only one here right now."

"I see... Hm?" He frowned at a thought. All of the accompanying Princess Guard, aside from the ones with Mia right now, were currently standing by in the manor, which meant... "Ah, I was wondering why I hadn't seen Sir Dion around. That explains it."

As Ludwig nodded to himself, Bel asked, "Um, Professor Ludwig, if it's okay, could I go with you?"

Frowning at her repeated usage of the scholastic title, Ludwig said, "Hm. Let me think..."

He considered her request. Ideally, she'd stay here and do her homework, but he wasn't so naive as to believe that would happen without his presence. Furthermore, Mia cared a great deal about her, and Count Lampron was certainly no friend. He'd arrange for a few imperial guards to stay with her, of course, but even then, he'd be leaving her in what was effectively enemy territory. That was some cause for concern.

It might actually benefit her to witness some real political back-and-forth being played out in front of her.

Ludwig didn't believe for a minute that Bel was Mia's half-sister. Still, it was undeniable that the girl bore some resemblance to her. A distant relative, perhaps. That seemed plausible.

Not only does she enjoy Her Highness's absolute trust, she's also closely

connected with Duke Yellowmoon's daughter, along with a number of people at Saint-Noel. It seems likely that Her Highness has a role in mind for her to play in the future...

Before making up his mind, he asked her a question for confirmation. "Miss Bel, you are acquainted with Lady Rafina, yes?"

"Oh, yes. I know her very well. In a way, you could even say that my fate is inextricably linked to hers!" she declared proudly with arms akimbo.

Ludwig raised a puzzled eyebrow. "Your fate? What do you mean?"

"Uh... Never mind. I just mean that we're very good friends," Bel said hastily, realizing the incongruity of her statement. "But why do you ask?"

He observed her for a moment, then shrugged and answered, "Because she, in fact, is the very person we're going to see."

With that, they left the Lampron residence and made their way to Solecsudo Castle. Their purpose? To first meet up with Anne. Fortunately, having received prior instructions, she was already waiting for them at the gate.

"My apologies for having you wait, Miss Anne."

"Oh, I don't mind at all. But what are we doing here?" she asked with a puzzled look.

"I was wondering too. What are we seeing Miss Rafina for?" added an equally clueless Bel.

"Good question. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure myself, except... When I was speaking to Her Highness earlier and brought up Lady Rafina, her expression changed, almost as if some troubling secret had been exposed..."

When he'd learned that Rafina was here in Sunkland, Ludwig had immediately thought of a potential solution to their dilemma. If they could secure the cooperation of the Holy Lady of Belluga, it'd send a powerful message to the Greenmoon-Echard faction.

But Her Highness made no attempt to do so... Why?

He couldn't help but feel that the answer lay in that odd expression she made. She seemed flustered by the fact that he knew Rafina was in Sunkland, which suggested that she might not have wanted him to ask Rafina for help. But he couldn't for the life of him figure out why.

So, he decided to go find out.

Anne nodded after hearing his explanation.

“I see... It’s certainly true that milady has a tendency to keep burdens to herself. We should definitely look into it.”

“Excuse me, Professor Ludwig,” said Bel, raising her hand. “I have a question.”

Ludwig let out a resigned sigh. “Yes, Miss Bel?”

Resigned, because he’d given up on getting Bel to stop calling him “Professor.”

“Miss Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire, so she’s aware of everything that’s going on, right? In that case, if there’s something that needs to be done, wouldn’t she just tell us to do it?” she asked with genuine puzzlement.

“A fair question,” answered Ludwig, switching to didactic mode. “Remember this well, Miss Bel. Doing only as you’re told is a mark of negligence. It is, in my opinion, a betrayal of Her Highness’s trust.”

“A betrayal of trust?”

“Yes. The fact that Her Highness permitted us to accompany her on this journey means she has expectations of us. Each of us, Miss Bel, has a mind capable of independent thought. Even if we’re not told, we’re expected to exercise it. Failing to do so is therefore an act of negligence and a betrayal of trust.”

“Even if we’re not told...” Bel murmured to herself before nodding to some private revelation. “When you put it that way... I think I understand. Everyone was like that. Everyone...did what they thought was best...for me...”

Left hanging was the question of who “everyone” referred to. Offering no further clarification, Bel quietly looked up to meet his gaze. In that moment, a rush of something—an aura, perhaps—seemed to stream out of her. Something truly and incorruptibly noble. Ludwig held his breath for a second, feeling as if he was in the presence of a sovereign.

“Then let us go,” she said, her voice ringing with a dignified majesty no less impressive than Mia’s.

They didn’t know where Rafina was staying. However, Anne knew someone who might—the owner of the restaurant-cum-inn that had hosted their luncheon.

“Welcome— Oh? You...were with Princess Mia...” The owner frowned

at Anne before shifting his gaze warily toward Ludwig.

"Hello. I am a vassal of Her Highness Princess Mia. My name is Ludwig Hewitt. I have an urgent need to speak with Lady Rafina and wish to request your help in contacting her."

Ludwig had heard from Anne that the man before him was a Belluga spy. The chances of him divulging any information to a stranger like Ludwig seemed slim, but...

"Is that so? Very well. This way, please."

The owner readily agreed.

"I thank you for your help. But...are you sure about this?" said Ludwig, caught off guard by the man's frankness.

"Vassals of Princess Mia shall be afforded every courtesy I can offer," the owner said with a grin. "Otherwise, I'll end up receiving a good scolding from Lady Rafina."

They were shown to the second floor.

I thought she'd be staying in a church somewhere in the capital. This certainly saves us some trouble, thought Ludwig as he followed the owner.

They stopped in front of the door of the farthest room. The owner knocked. Soon after, the door opened.

"Hm? Gosh, this is a rather interesting group."

Rafina appeared and greeted them with a gentle smile. Then, she looked around and added in a slightly disappointed tone, "I see that Princess Mia isn't with you."

"Indeed. Her Highness is attending a dinner party with the King of Sunkland," replied Ludwig apologetically.

"I see. That's a shame. Well, come in." She gestured them in. To call the room modest would be both a euphemism and an understatement. Furnished with only a bed and a simple chair, it seemed in no way fitting for a person of her status. "I'm terribly sorry. It's a little cramped, isn't it? I think we can fit the three of you, though."

She ushered Anne and Bel onto the bed. She herself sat in her chair, and Ludwig was seated in a second chair the owner brought in. Bel, who clearly hadn't expected a reception like this, kept looking around with wide, wonder-filled eyes. Rafina smiled wryly at her.

"I assume you think this room is a bit too plain for the Saint of Belluga?"

“Huh? N-No, I think it’s fine...”

Bel hastily and unconvincingly shook her head, prompting Ludwig to step in.

“It is a suitably modest room for the Holy Lady. We were simply caught off guard. We had thought you would be staying at a church.”

“I suppose I certainly could have, but...” Her expression clouded a little. “Sunkland is a pious nation. No less so than Belluga. Because of that, every time I show up, I’m asked to have my portrait drawn.”

“Portraits, you say...”

“They sell very well, apparently. The earnings are used for charity to help the poor, so I don’t particularly mind, but well... I’m sure you understand, yes? Try imagining a portrait of yourself with great big wings spreading from your back, and you’re stepping on a dreadful-looking monster like some sort of holy warrior. Would you want to be the model for such a piece? I find it...difficult to endure.”

Her gaze went distant, and for a brief second, she seemed to age a decade. Then, the moment passed, and she returned to her usual self.

“Oh, gosh. Look at me rambling on and on. My apologies. I’m not usually so chatty, but knowing you’re Mia’s friends, well...” She giggled. “In any case, I assume you didn’t come at a time like this just to hear me grumble. How can I help you?”

“Regarding that... We have come to ask for your advice.”

“Oh? About what?” she asked curiously.

Ludwig studied her for a second before continuing. “Pardon my bluntness, Lady Rafina, but how much do you know about the current situation surrounding Her Highness?”

“Well... She told me that she’s here because of a marriage proposal between Miss Esmeralda and Prince Echard.”

Rafina recounted what she’d heard earlier in the day during her luncheon, collecting her thoughts after each topic before starting the next. Near the end, she paused as something occurred to her.

“That reminds me... Mia asked me about the views of Count Lampron and other Sunkland nobles. She also wanted to know what I thought about them...”

Ludwig grunted. “Ah... So she *was* thinking about asking you for assistance...”

Why had Mia asked those questions, then? Was she not sure whether Rafina would side with the older Sunkland nobles on this issue? It must have been for confirmation. If Rafina's views coincided with those of the traditional conservatives, Mia would have to forgo her assistance.

"Oh, if she'd only asked. I'm her friend. Of course I'd help her..." Rafina let out a mournful sigh. "But of course, it's because we're friends that she chose not to, isn't it...?"

Ludwig nodded solemnly, for he understood her plight.

Indeed, friendship, at times, could be used as leverage—stealthily, even. Had Mia asked, Rafina would surely have answered. But Mia hadn't, because she wanted to ensure the cooperation she received was the result of honest willingness and not unintentional manipulation. So, she'd probed her views beforehand, because Mia was the kind of person who cared not only for her friends but the integrity of their friendship. In Ludwig's world, at least.

"I did tell her I don't necessarily agree with Count Lampron on everything, though... But ah, I see..." She sighed again, this time even more deeply. "It's because I told her about the matter with the Equestrian Kingdom, isn't it? I said I was having so much trouble that I was hoping she'd be able to help... When she heard that, she must have shelved her own request to not burden me further."

Her hypothesis received a resounding nod of approval from one of the listeners.

"I think that's exactly what happened, Lady Rafina," said Mia's most loyal subject, Anne. She spoke with utter confidence. "Milady is a very kind and compassionate individual. If she realized that you're already busy with your own matters, I doubt she'd ask you for help. If anything, she'd be thinking of ways to help you instead."

Despite her utter confidence, she was, of course, utterly wrong. Unfortunately, no one present could correct her grievous misassumption. As a result, the conversation steadily morphed into an echo chamber of Mia worship.

After they'd heaped all the praise they could on her, they finally returned to their original topic.

"Oh, I wish I knew how to help her," said Rafina. "Do you know, Ludwig? Could you tell me what I should be doing? What does Mia wish

for me to do?”

“If I am to attempt to interpret Her Highness’s intentions, I believe they will be...”

And so, Ludwig proceeded to expound on the vast and immeasurable depths that was Mia’s mind and deliberation. Rafina was impressed. Anne was awed. And Bel...

“Wow... Grandmother Mia is *amazing*!”

Bel was straight up brainwashed.

Chapter 43: Another Big Sister

While Mia was busy pulling critical information out of Keithwood, a friendly conversation had developed between the remaining members in the dining room.

“Ah yes, I am reminded that she is acquainted with Keithwood. In that case...” murmured King Abram.

Tiona Rudolvon observed his quiet musing with idle interest. At first, knowing that she was attending a dinner party with royalty, she’d arrived tense and apprehensive. Afraid of giving accidental offense, she took extra care to conduct herself with the utmost courtliness. As the dinner went on, however, her initial anxiety was eased by the cordial atmosphere. Conscious thought faded, and ingrained discipline took over.

As a backlash against the condescending attitude of central nobility, Tiona had trained herself from a young age to meet, if not surpass, every standard of polite society. From courtly manners to scholarly know-how, she’d acquired a host of skills, going so far as to drill herself in swordsmanship, all so conceited nobles would stop looking down on her.

Today, that tireless self-improvement bore a most impressive fruit. Freed from nerves, her natural character shone through, radiating a singular aura unlike any other in the room. Unlike Esmeralda, who was the potential bride, and Mia, for whom the marriage could have significant consequences, Tiona was a bystander of sorts. She had no skin in the game and could therefore observe the scene from her own unique perspective.

She shifted her gaze from the king to Sion. *Prince Sion cares a lot about Prince Echard, doesn’t he?*

She resonated deeply with Sion’s position. Esmeralda wasn’t the only big sister present. Tiona also had a little brother. On top of that, Cyril, having been for a long time a timid young boy lacking confidence, bore a great deal of resemblance with Echard. She knew all too well how he felt, watching his flustered brother struggle with a barrage of questions from Esmeralda while discreetly—ever so discreetly—throwing in a few careful

words from time to time to take some heat off the poor boy without denting his delicate pride. The line between stifling protectiveness and injurious neglect was thin, and the stress of walking it was, in Tiona's eyes, painfully evident on Sion's face. It was, in a way, endearing to watch.

Boys can be such a handful, she thought, realizing with a slight hint of guilt that the endearment she felt was not only for the younger prince. The sight of Sion, always so perfect and beyond reproach, struggling so much was, frankly, adorable. What left the greatest impression on her, however, was when the king had been talking to Mia earlier, and Echard had been trying his best to follow the conversation. Sion had snuck a glance at his brother then, and Tiona had not failed to catch the sheer pride in Sion's eyes. It was a pride that hit very close to home.

I know the feeling. He's probably hoping Her Highness will rub off on his brother a little.

It was clear that important talks would be had between Mia and the king. By having Echard listen in, Sion was doubtlessly hoping for his brother to learn a thing or two from the exchange.

I felt the same toward Cyril...

Ever since meeting Mia that day, Cyril had changed. Before she knew it, the shy, unassertive brother she'd always known had metamorphosed into a vital member of Mia's team, working alongside the princess of a neighboring nation for the good of all. Having encouraged him for as long as she could remember, Tiona felt immensely proud of her brother. At the same time, she also couldn't help but feel a tinge of envy toward Mia. What she'd failed to do her whole life, Mia had accomplished with one meeting. As glad as she was for the results, that was still a hard pill to swallow...

Comforting him... Nursing his broken heart... That still falls to me in the end, doesn't it?

Cyril had a crush on Mia. That was all but certain. Equally certain was its unrequitability. It was an impossible love, and it was up to her to console her brother when he faced the inevitable reality of his feelings. This was, in fact, something that occupied her thoughts with some frequency.

In any case, the point was that Tiona knew what it was like to have little brother troubles. Sion was probably hoping that like himself—like everyone whose lives Mia had entered, perhaps—Echard would be changed for the better by his encounter with her.

Now that I think about it, it really is the same for everyone, isn't it? Her Highness truly is something else...

People who crossed paths with Mia would, without exception, experience positive change. Personal growth. As Tiona did herself. Turning her thoughts to the luncheon with Rafina, she was reminded of the time she'd confronted the perpetrators of her confinement incident...and *forgiven* them. There had once been a Tiona who wouldn't have—couldn't have—forgiven. That was a Tiona concerned only with getting back at the central nobility she so despised.

We all met Her Highness, and we all changed...

It was as if the world itself would transform as Mia touched it. Like a beacon of change, a new reality—one that was brighter, warmer—slowly expanded from her to replace the old. The thought, however, begged a question.

What if she hadn't met Mia? What would have happened to her? Desperate for comeuppance, to what lengths would she have gone to even the score with the central nobility? Seething in bitter hatred born of anger and frustration, she'd surely have sworn never to forgive them. What future awaited that version of herself?

Suddenly, a strange scene flashed before her eyes. She saw a grand square soaked in the crimson light of the setting sun. Victory reverberated through the air, empty and hollow. Before her, mired in irretrievable red, was what she'd fought so hard to lose. It was lost now. And so was she. All that remained was bone-weary apathy.

It was an impossible scene, too fanciful to be real, yet too real to be mere fancy. A resurfaced nightmare, perhaps, from a restless night...

Just then, the door to the dining room swung open, and Mia returned smiling like some great weight had been lifted from her shoulders...or her bowels.

Her Highness looked so troubled when she left, but she seems to be in a much better mood now. I wonder if she's figured out a way to deal with Miss Esmeralda's issue...?

That had to be it.

She's always so amazing. Maybe she'll somehow solve Prince Sion's problem in the process too...

To her, the rift between Sion and Echard was clear as day and had been

bothering her the whole meal. Worse yet was the knowledge that it was being exploited by other nobles for political gain, making Sion's already-awkward position even more difficult. It was a complicated issue for which Tiona couldn't fathom a solution. But if Mia were to tackle it... Surely, like every problem that had come before, she'd solve it with ease.

And is that...okay?

She heard a small voice in her head. Perhaps Mia could indeed make everything better. Did that make it okay for Tiona to stand idly by?

Are you *okay with that? No regrets?*

If the problem was solved, but not by her...

If you speak now, he'll still hear... He's still within reach...

The voice, hers yet not, faded to a distant echo, then disappeared, leaving behind a frustrating uncertainty in her heart. She took a bite of dessert. The taste escaped her.

For those who were paying attention, though, Keithwood's words proved true, and the dessert *was* indeed a doozy.

"Th-This is... Moons, this can't be..."

So much so that it left Mia speechless when she first laid eyes on it. An irrelevant fact, but a fact nonetheless.

Chapter 44: Debriefing Session

“Phew, that was some good eating,” said Mia. “I’m so full. Eating so much probably isn’t good for my health, though. I’d better start reining it in...*after* this Sunkland trip.” In other words, while she was still in Sunkland, she was going to keep stuffing her face. “Hmm... Being so full is making me sleepy...”

Her eyelids began to droop, and she stifled a yawn as she walked out the royal castle. Waiting outside the gate was Anne, whom she greeted with a wave of her hand.

“Ah, there you are. Sorry to have kept you waiting... Oh?” She paused, realizing Anne wasn’t alone. “My, Ludwig and Bel? What’s going on?”

She gave them a puzzled look.

“Uh, I can explain later, but first, let’s hurry up and head back to Count Lampron’s residence,” said Anne.

“Mm. All right then.”

Given how sleepy she felt, she was ready to crawl into bed, but it was too early to retire for the night. The ball was drawing close, and she still had to consolidate all the new information she’d gained. There was no time to lose. With that in mind, she convinced her eyelids to stay open for a little longer.

Upon returning to the Lampron residence, she immediately paid Esmeralda a visit in her room.

“My! Miss Mia! How nice of you to visit. Here, I’ll have some tea made for us.”

A cup of steaming black tea was soon placed before Mia, into which she added some milk and a lot of sugar. A sip and a sigh of pleasure followed. Then, she said, “So, Esmeralda, let’s hear it. What do you think about Prince Echard?”

“Hm, good question...” Esmeralda folded her arms. “He’s still got a long way to go, but I can see him getting there eventually. His face is definitely a

ten out of ten. Still young, especially around the eyes and the bridge of the nose, so the overall impression still skews more cute than handsome. Give him some time, and I'm sure he'll become as stunningly good-looking as Prince Sion or his father. Also, we talked a bit, and he seemed fine in terms of personality too. A little shy, perhaps, but that can change as he grows older."

Thus concluded Esmeralda, professional boy appraiser.

"A true diamond in the rough, that boy!" she added. "It'll take some work, but he's definitely worth it!"

It seemed that the prince had met Esmeralda's standard of attractiveness.

"The one thing that worries me, I suppose," Esmeralda continued in a musing tone, "is the existence of his exceptional brother... When I mentioned Prince Sion, his expression darkened for a second. I wonder if his relationship with his brother has left some sort of scar in his heart..."

Mia found herself deeply impressed by this analysis. It lined up perfectly with what Keithwood had told her. *Wow, she figured all that out from one dinner? Credit where credit is due. She really does have an eye for this kind of thing.* Also, Esmeralda must have taken quite a liking to the prince, judging by the amount of thought she was putting in. *If she actually likes him, then this marriage proposal isn't something I can just sabotage anymore.* Of course, letting it proceed would likely benefit her opposition, putting more roadblocks in her path to becoming empress.

"I wish there was some way for me to help heal that wound of his..." Esmeralda murmured.

Mia, too busy with her own thoughts, paid little attention.

But then again, at home, Esmeralda behaves like a queen. Her little brothers have got nothing on her. And those little brothers are the ones who'll have to challenge me as contenders for the throne, so...

Maybe it wasn't even that bad.

"That's not something I can do anything about," Mia muttered, nodding to herself before looking Esmeralda in the eye. "I'll have to leave that side of things to *you*, Esmeralda."

Esmeralda stared back with mouth agape. "Huh? You're...leaving it to me?"

Mia grabbed her shoulder and gave it a quick shake. "Come on, girl, what's with the dumb look? Get a hold of yourself. You can do this."

What she meant to convey was, “You always get what you want, right? Just keep doing that.” So long as Esmeralda was calling the shots in the Greenmoon family, things would be fine.

As for whether Esmeralda correctly interpreted this meaning...

“Miss Mia... I never knew you trusted me so much... All right, just leave it to me, then!”

Well, she nodded back, anyway.

After exiting Esmeralda’s room, Mia crossed her arms in thought.

Now then... I think I have the political side of things under control. The problem now is the whole assassination affair. I have to do something about Echard’s inferiority complex, or he’ll probably keep going after Sion, she mused as she made her way toward her own guest room. *Easier said than done. This is really something that Esmeralda should be handling since she’s the one getting married, but for all her talk of handsome boys, she actually has very little romantic experience with them...*

It was then that a crucial realization dawned on her.

“Wait a minute... Am *I* the more experienced one here? After all, I’ve been on long rides with a number of gentlemen, and I’ve danced with Abel a couple times too. I’ve even danced with Sion before... Hm, you know what? I *do* have more experience with men. If anyone can heal Prince Echard’s psychological scar, it’s probably me,” she murmured pensively as she entered her room.

Inside, Anne, Bel, and Ludwig were waiting for her.

“Oh, I’m sorry to have kept all of you waiting. Is something the matter?” She raised an eyebrow. Bel raised both in return.

“As a matter of fact,” said the young girl excitedly, “we spoke to Miss Rafina.”

“My, Miss Rafina?”

“Yes. We went to her to request her aid,” Ludwig explained. “I figured we’d use our enemy’s scheme against them.”

Huh... What scheme? And we’re using something against them? What? Her head began to acquire the stereotypical tilt of confusion. She immediately grabbed it with both hands and wrenched it straight again. *Phew, close one... I almost gave away the fact that I have no idea what he’s talking about! Which must be because I’m feeling sleepy, and my head isn’t*

working as well as it should.

"I understand that Your Highness does not wish to burden Lady Rafina with our troubles, but we made the arbitrary decision to consult her," said Ludwig.

"I'm sorry, milady. I'm the one who took them to Lady Rafina. If that was against your wishes, then I...I apologize," said Anne, the concern in her expression growing inversely with the volume of her voice.

Mia smiled reassuringly at her. "It's all right. Don't worry." She had no idea what it was that might have needed worrying about, but whatever.

I wonder what burden he's talking about... And what did they ask Miss Rafina to do?

She glanced at Ludwig, hoping to find some answers. She received only a firm nod in response. It seemed to imply something of a "Trust us. We've got this under control."

Hmm... Ludwig apparently has a plan. Well, whatever. We're desperately in need of more allies right now anyway. It can't hurt to have Miss Rafina on our side, she thought before something else occurred to her. *But didn't Miss Rafina say she was dealing with some trouble on her end? I wonder if this means I'll have to help her with that in return...*

After all, these kinds of arrangements tended to be give and take. If Rafina scratched her back, she'd have to scratch Rafina's back as well.

What did she say again? Something about the Equestrian Kingdom, I think?

Just then, Bel chipped in with a frown. "By the way, Miss Mia, would you happen to know anything about Rina? She left a while ago and still isn't back."

"My, Rina? She went out by herself at night?" Mia said, shocked.

As the only daughter of Duke Lorenz Etoile Yellowmoon, she was the apple of his eye—his absolute pride and joy. Duke Lorenz Etoile Yellowmoon was also a master of poisons. It therefore went without saying that if anything were to happen to Citrina, Mia might end up eating something upsettingly poisonous in the near future.

She leapt to her feet in a panic. Or rather, she would have, had Ludwig not said, "Speaking of which, I haven't seen Sir Dion around here either. I suspect he might have followed her out."

"Ah, I see. Dion's with her, is he? In that case..."

Mia breathed a sigh of relief. The math worked in her favor. They could throw an army at Citrina, and she'd still come out fine. After all, with Dion at her side, she'd be at an army plus one. In Mia's mind, his one-man-army-ness was becoming a mathematically accurate description of his prowess. The only potential cause for concern now was Dion rubbing off on Citrina. She had a feeling Duke Yellowmoon wouldn't be pleased if his daughter acquired a taste for more *stabby* methods of assassination. His displeasure might lead him to exact his vengeance in kind, and Mia certainly didn't want any daggers flying at her from the shadows.

Regardless, Citrina's safety was, for now, guaranteed.

"I think we have nothing to worry about," said Mia.

Bel nodded. "I agree. If General Dion is with her, then she's safe as can be."

A knock then sounded at the door.

"Excuse me, Your Highness. I'm back."

"Ah! Rina!"

Bel rushed over as the door opened, revealing her best friend.

"Hm? Bel, what are you doing awake at this hour?" asked a surprised Citrina before scanning the room. "Oh, no... Don't tell me they forced you to make up for all the homework you skipped during the day, and you've been doing it until now..." She glared at Ludwig.

Bel, however, puffed out her cheeks indignantly. "Hey! It's not very nice of you to assume I skipped doing my homework just because you weren't here, Rina! That makes it seem like I can't get my homework done on my own!"

Which, you know, was true, but...

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way, Bel," said Citrina, hastily shaking her hands. "I know you can get things done if you put your mind to it."

She looked nervously at Bel, who kept doing the pufferfish thing with her face for a few more seconds before breaking out in giggles.

"Ehe hee, got you! I was just kidding, Rina!" said Bel, sticking out her tongue mischievously.

"Ah! That's so mean! I don't like it when you're mean, Bel!" Citrina thrust her lips out in a sullen pout. It did not take long, however, for the two girls to be giggling away again, innocent smiles restored to their faces.

It should be noted that Citrina's description of Bel could also be

interpreted as “utterly incapable of getting anything done if she doesn’t put her mind to it.” However, no one in the room was truly mean enough to point that out. They simply watched with tender gazes as the two girls enjoyed a moment of pure, unbridled friendship. Finally, after they’d thoroughly laughed their hearts out, Citrina stepped up to Mia. The girl now wore her usual sweet, flowerlike smile.

The way she can just change her expression like that is honestly amazing. It’s like she’s flipping a switch...

Citrina proceeded to report on her findings. “I spent this evening investigating the open market. Sir Dion Alaia graciously offered his help, so I brought him with me as well.”

Huh. The open market?

Mia tensed the muscles in her neck, resisting the urge to tilt her head. She needed to appear thoughtful, not clueless. For some extra camouflage, she folded her arms. “Hm... So you went to the open market with Dion... Did you discover anything there?”

“Yes. To make a long story short, someone there previously had some form of contact with Prince Echard.”

“With Prince Echard, you say...” Mia hummed pensively to hide the fact that she was really starting to sweat. She had absolutely no idea what Citrina was talking about. She didn’t even know what an open market was. Admitting so was out of the question, but the issue also seemed too risky to ignore. As she tried to think of a way to subtly coax out some answers, Citrina leaned in and stared her in the face.

“Uh, Your Highness?”

Mia almost jumped, thinking her cover of comprehension had been blown, but...

“Is it okay for *them* to be hearing about this?” asked Citrina, gesturing with her eyes toward Ludwig and Anne.

“Ah, uh... Of course. They’re...” said Mia before trailing off. A brilliant idea came to her. One that could completely turn the tide in this losing battle she was fighting against her own cluelessness. “They’re my most loyal subjects. I keep nothing from them, nor is there any need to. By all means, please explain to them the implications of your current discoveries. I suspect all this sudden talk about the, uh, open...market? Might be a tad confusing for them.”

She glanced at Ludwig, who nodded deeply. “Thank you, Your Highness. We would also appreciate the chance to fully grasp the current situation.”

Citrina nodded as well. “Understood. In that case, Your Highness, would it be all right if we called Dion Alaia here? I’d like to have him speak about what happened tonight as well.”

“Certainly. Go ahead.” Mia gave the final nod, which conveniently allowed her to hide a breakthrough yawn.

Midnight was upon them. A new day was about to arrive.

Chapter 45: The Challenge (Received) by Great Detective Mia

While waiting for Dion, Citrina relayed to the rest of the members in the room what she'd learned from Connery. She described how the open market was a fairly rough neighborhood and that Prince Echard had gone missing for a short time there.

"The open market... I see. Markets thrive on disorder. The looser the regulations, the more vibrant the businesses. Furthermore, given its distance from the castle, some degree of negligence in policing is, I suppose, inevitable," said Ludwig, nodding along to the explanation.

"However," Citrina continued, "the large amount of traffic in and out of the open market gives Serpents lots of easy cover. The Second Prince going missing in a place like that sounded too suspicious, so I went to investigate the area myself. Fortunately, it didn't take long to find the information I needed. Apparently, there was a strange man who had spoken to Prince Echard..."

After extracting the necessary information from her assailant-turned-victims, Citrina had explored the outskirts of the open market. As Connery had said, it was teeming with the type of people who seemed connected with the criminal underside of society. Which was exactly what she'd been hoping for. At her request, Dion proceeded to start tapping on every shoulder he came across and asking said shoulders' owners some questions. By tapping, we of course mean with his sword, and by asking, we of course mean interrogation. Needless to say, he met with little resistance.

Upon hearing this, Mia immediately thought, *Yes, that's certainly in character for Dion. Honestly, I pity the people he ran into. They might think they're tough stuff, but no one out-thugs Dion.*

Meanwhile, Citrina kept explaining.

"In the process of questioning the people we came across, we got some information pointing us to what was probably the hideout of the strange

man, so we went there to take a look...”

Citrina silently looked up at the sky. Clouds had covered the moon, leaving the land darker than ever. Hidden under a thick veil of shadow, the open market was oddly quiet. The daytime sounds of business—bartering customers, jingles of goods and money—were all gone, replaced by silence. A silence that, for all its lack of sound, was filled with a restless energy. Citrina knew this feeling well. It was the silence of being watched. By many, many eyes.

“Huh. So, this is the open market.” She glanced around before adding, “I wouldn’t want to come here even when it’s bright out.”

It wasn’t a suitable place to bring Bel. It also didn’t seem interesting enough to be worth a solo saunter.

“There’s a good number of them watching us from a distance. Guess I’ll go round a few of them up...” said Dion.

“No, that won’t be necessary. They’ll probably just tell us the same thing anyway.”

Citrina shook her head and shrugged. All the men they’d “questioned” had told them the same two things: the person who attempted to contact Prince Echard spoke with an Equestrian accent, and they were hiding out in a building not far from the open market.

“A few also mentioned that they had no idea when the man came to Sunkland, and they haven’t seen him lately,” Citrina murmured.

It hadn’t taken much convincing to get any of them to speak, so the information gathering process had gone fairly quickly. However...

She pursed her lips and hummed with mild frustration.

This is obviously a trap. I doubt we’ll wring any information out of these people that wasn’t meant to be given to us.

She sighed. At least she had the man standing behind her though. The presence of the Empire’s Finest, Dion Alaia, was profoundly encouraging. Princess Mia’s sharpest sword carried himself with the aplomb of someone who walked into traps for fun.

So she figured she’d try doing exactly that.

Shortly after passing through the open market, the building in question appeared before them. With almost theatrical timing, the clouds parted to

illuminate its exterior in silver moonlight. It was a crude structure made of stone, not dissimilar to its neighbors in design or quality. There was a wooden door flanked by two windows that were boarded up. The moon would not follow them inside.

"Dion Alaia, how well do you see in the dark?"

"Eh, okay, I guess? As good as the next guy."

"I see..."

Citrina considered what "okay" meant in the context of the Empire's Finest.

He seems like the kind of person who can probably take down four or five people blind, so...

Based on the few times she'd dealt with the wolfmaster before, she knew him to be a warrior who could fight proficiently with his vision impaired. If he could do it, surely, Dion could too.

"In that case," she said, "let's see... How about we take a careful look at the surroundings and then break down that wooden door?"

"You want to go in? Seems like a pretty clear trap."

"But you'll protect Rina if anything happens, right, Sir Empire's Finest?" She smiled tauntingly at him, causing him to shake his head.

"First, the princess, and now you... I swear, what is it with young Tearmoon noblewomen and their love for recklessly charging into danger?"

Citrina did not grace his quip with a response. She walked quietly up to the building and peered in through a crack in the window. Silent darkness greeted her.

"Dion Alaia. I'll have you know that I resent your description of my actions as reckless. This building is big enough that even if they set it on fire, we'll have enough room to escape. If a bunch of them ambush us inside, then you can deal with them. There's nothing reckless about this at all."

She took a step back and pointed at the door. Dion sighed and complied. There was a quick flash, and the door was no more, reduced to two severed pieces of wood. As expected, it was pitch-black inside.

"Just to be clear, Lady Yellowmoon, danger doesn't care about definitions. If you don't consider this reckless, that's fine, but from this point on, you'd better be *extra* not reckless. Hiding behind me, preferably. Get too careless, and you might not walk back outta here alive."

“Yes, yes, you’ve made your point clear already. Shall I hold hands with you, since you’re so worried?”

Despite her flippant response, she nevertheless obeyed, keeping close behind him as he eyed the surroundings warily and slowly walked in.

“Hmph... Looks like nobody’s home,” he muttered with mild disappointment. “What now, Lady Yellowmoon? We’re going to need a light if we want to look around.”

That was when they heard a heavy thump, and some sort of powder filled the air.

Dion *tsk*ed. “Bloody hell... Is it poison?”

In one smooth motion, he threw his coat around Citrina’s head, covered his face with one arm, and picked her up with the other. A few bounding strides, and they were back outside.

“No, Dion Alaia. It probably isn’t,” muttered Citrina, dangling from his arm. “Otherwise, they wouldn’t fill the whole building with it like that. It’d be a waste. Also, it’s too conspicuous. Making it so obvious defeats the point of using poison.”

His sword leapt out of its scabbard as he dashed out the door. He whipped his gaze left and right, scanning the area. There was no sign of any assailants. Nevertheless, he kept his guard up and his sword drawn. Only after a long period of silent vigilance did he relax.

“Not poison, huh?” he said, spitting on the ground. “The hell was that supposed to be then? A prank?” He sheathed his sword and patted the powder out of his hair. “No, that’s not it either.”

Citrina arched her back and stretched before holding up her hand at him and waving it a few times. He glanced at her and, seeing her outstretched hand, knelt down before her so she could reach his head. She brushed her fingers through a tuft of his hair, picking up a pinch of powder. She played with it a little before bringing it up to her nose. Then, she licked some off the tip of her finger.

“Hey!” shouted Dion in sudden alarm.

She shot him an oblique glance before taking a sip from the water flask she’d brought with her and rinsing her mouth.

“Relax. It’s just flour. Flour that’s gone bad.”

“Flour? What were they hoping to accomplish by dumping a ton of flour into the room? Did they drop it by accident or something?” He eyed her

dubiously.

“I’ve heard that filling the air in a room with powder and setting it alight will cause a sudden and violent combustion. It’s effectively a makeshift bomb.”

“Huh. They tried to flour bomb us into oblivion? Do these guys have too much time on their hands or something? They couldn’t come up with a simpler way to kill us?” He scoffed.

Citrina gazed at the ground wordlessly for a few seconds before responding. “Dion Alaia. Do you know what the perfect poison is?”

“Beats me. One that kills you the second you take a sip?”

She shook her head. “The way I see it, the perfect poison is one that leaves no trace of it having been used. The best way to kill someone is to make it look like they died naturally, raising no suspicion of assassination in the first place. The second best is to kill in a way that makes it *very* obvious what poison was used. A poison that kills in a highly identifiable fashion can be used to divert suspicion or highlight fake suspects,” Citrina explained. “As for this flour... I suspect it’s just an elaborate parting gift. If their goal was to lure out and incapacitate their pursuers, they could have used paralyzing poisons or blinding agents. As long as they immobilize us, they can do whatever they want with us afterward, be it questioning or torture. This, however...is a simple parting gift. They knew we were hunting them, so they left a fake trail for us to follow, at the end of which was a simple contraption to get rid of us for good.”

“They faked an obvious trail to hide the real one, huh?”

“If we search very carefully, maybe we can find some traces of the real trail...but if they throw us a bone, we might as well bite, right? Especially when we’re pressed for time. A fake trail is still a trail.”

Dion crossed his arms with a *hmph*. “And that bone led us to this building, which was intended to blow up while we were searching it?”

“That’s correct. It wouldn’t draw any attention. All that would be left is some charred debris and the remnants of burnt flour. Between that and a poison-soaked room with two dead bodies inside, which one do you think would raise more suspicion? This contraption is in the same vein as traceless poisons that feign natural death. Except in this case, it looks like an accident,” said Citrina as she studied the building.

“Well, in any case, it seems that we’ve come up empty-handed. We have

no clear evidence this is Serpent-related, and at this point, the whole Equestrian accent thing is sounding pretty dubious too...” said Dion with a shrug.

Citrina gave him a sweet smile.

“There’s no need to be too disappointed, Dion Alaia. The Serpents are almost certainly behind this.”

“And what makes you say that, Detective Yellowmoon?”

She met his jeering tone with an even sweeter smile. “Rudimentary, my dear knight. Did you know you can use flour to blow up a building? Did the possibility of such a trap even cross your mind before I told you about it?”

“Aaah... I see.”

“This trap, once activated, will look like nothing more than a building crumbling, or at most an accidental fire. If kept inactive, the only evidence is a room full of flour. To most people that would mean nothing. To someone in the know—someone like Rina—it’s an ingenious trap made by someone who’s equally in the know. Secret knowledge available only to a select few is great for concealing evidence, but to knowing eyes, it might as well be a name tag. Only so many people can make such things, after all.”

At that, she paused and tilted her head in thought for a while before continuing.

“On that note, the Equestrian accent... That’s not useless information either.”

“Why’s that?”

The sweetness in her smile turned into sheer honey, viscous and ensnaring. “Why, because if they want to make it look like the Equestrian Kingdom is behind this...then there are only so many poisons they can use.”

“That concludes my report of tonight’s findings. Dion Alaia, is there anything you’d like to add?”

“Not really. Except, I guess, to advise Your Highness never to make an enemy of the Yellowmoons,” he said with a shrug.

Bel grinned. “That’s okay. There’s no way Rina will ever become our enemy.”

“Bel...”

Before the two girls could begin another public display of their affection, Mia let out what was definitely a breath and not a yawn and said,

“Rina, are you able to deal with all the poisons that come from the region around the Equestrian Kingdom?”

“Yes, every last one, Your Highness,” Citrina answered with a bow.

“I must say though, the Equestrian Kingdom... This term has been coming up rather frequently as of late... Miss Rafina said she came here because of something related to them too... I wonder if there’s any significance to that...” murmured Mia.

She let out another not-yawn.

With that, Mia’s information gathering was complete. With all the pieces at her disposal, could the Great Sage of the Empire solve the puzzle and guide the incident toward a wholesome resolution?

“Fwaaaah... No, I can’t do this anymore... I’m too sleepy...”

And would she have to do it in her sleep?

Only time would tell.

Side Chapter: The Fair and Righteous King of Justice

The Penal King, Sion Sol Sunkland, was a man of many enemies. His detractors would frequently speak ill of him: denouncing him in public and cursing him in private. But even his most vehement critics couldn't deny one thing about him, and that was the impartiality of his judgment. He was just in his actions. Unrelentingly so, entirely unswayed by personal emotion or interest. When asked about him, one opinion would always be unanimous.

"His Majesty the Penal King is fair and just. There's no doubt about that. If he deems you guilty, he will put you to the sword, no ifs, ands, or buts. After all, he did so to his own brothers, one by blood and one by nurture. His royal sibling. His most trusted attendant. He executed both of them. Don't know if that's a good thing, mind you, but he sure did."

That day, an old noble came to the king's office.

Sion quietly looked up as an attendant announced the arrival of a visitor. The face of the man standing before him was one he has known for most of his life.

"Count Lampron. How have you been these past few years?"

The count smiled. Sion noted the nervous tension in his cheeks. "Very well, Your Majesty. It gladdens me to see you in good health as well."

Count Lampron was once the leader of Sunkland's conservative nobles. He also served as Echard's teacher for some time. It wasn't too long ago when he finally withdrew from the front lines of politics into what was effectively semi-retirement. In the process, his commanding aura and attitude seemed to retire as well, leaving behind an elderly man with a much milder temperament.

Sion gave him a curious look, wondering what business the emeritus count could have. "Good, good. But what brings you here today? If it is

nostalgic banter you seek, I would gladly indulge you were it not for the insurrection. There is still much work to be done in cleaning up the aftermath. I fear I have little time for casual discourse."

Ten days ago, a revolt had occurred in a part of Sunkland. Fed up with Sion's austere governance, a number of nobles had rallied around the former second prince Echard and, using him as a banner, attempted to stage a large-scale insurrection. Unfortunately, they'd picked a poor fight, for their opponent was Sion Sol Sunkland—king, genius, and merciless enforcer of justice. Having caught wind of the plot in its infancy, he'd immediately deployed his personal army against the conspirators. Under his direct leadership, it didn't take long to apprehend the whole lot. All the offenders were thrown into the underground dungeon. Among them was his own brother, Echard.

"The insurrection is exactly what I wish to speak about, Your Majesty." Lampron reverently bowed before meeting Sion's gaze.

"I beg you to reconsider His Highness Prince Echard's execution. He could not have participated in this willingly. I am sure he tried his best to persuade the other ringleaders from engaging in such an act of treason."

"So you say... But I have reason to think otherwise. Echard has always seen himself as inferior to me, and has struggled greatly with this perception. It seems entirely possible for the others to have persuaded him, and for him to leap at a chance to dethrone me."

"But..."

"In either case, his actions have burdened the kingdom with needless chaos. Innocent blood was spilt as a consequence. He must be made to answer for his deeds."

"He's your brother, Your Majesty! You share his blood—"

The Penal King cut him off, severing his last hope in the process. "Even so... No, *especially* so. Because he shares my blood, Count Lampron, his punishment must not be lessened."

"Don't you see, Lampron? You spent your whole life insisting that the rule of the king in Sunkland must be just and fair. You of all people must understand. I *am* the king."

Absolute power must be wielded with absolute impartiality. As the king, he must not allow his personal emotions and interests to influence his judgment. He who commits a crime punishable by death must be sentenced

to death, no matter his identity. That was what it meant to be fair.

"I see... Very well. So it is, so it shall be..."

Count Lampron left without another word.

The incident occurred that night. An attempt was made to break Echard and a number of his fellow conspirators out of prison. When it was discovered that the main perpetrator was Count Lampron, Sion felt...nothing in particular. No surprise, no poignancy. Lampron had taught Echard in his youth, and they had remained on good terms since. It was understandable for the old man to have developed an affection for his former pupil. Such things happened. It made sense.

Given these extenuating circumstances, there might even be room to lessen the count's sentence on compassionate grounds. As he pondered the judicial ramifications of this development, a second report came in. This one, he failed to embrace with the same insouciance. Among those apprehended for the attempted prison break was his friend and trusted vassal, Keithwood.

The next morning, he went down to the dungeons and stopped in front of Keithwood's cell. He frowned a little at the sight of his lifelong comrade, dirt-covered and worn. His bottom lip quivered slightly, aching from the pressure of his teeth. For the briefest of moments, the man behind the mask seemed to surface. His eyes glistened, hinting at tears. Then, the moment was gone, and the king had returned in all his austere dignity.

"You've done a fool's deed, Keithwood..." His voice was soft. Steady. Unfeelingly cold.

Keithwood smiled, infinitely weary. "Yes... I suppose I have. I couldn't stop you." He shrugged. It lightened his expression, but failed to hide the deep regret in his voice.

"You...disappoint me, Keithwood. I was hoping to have you as my right hand for many more years to come..." Sion said. "Why?"

"You don't know?"

"No. I don't. The righteousness of the king is at the core of this kingdom. It is what Sunkland—as a nation, as an *ideal*—is built upon. It is our essence. Echard must die. To do otherwise is to let justice falter."

He was the king. He had to be righteous. Be the upholder of all that was fair and just.

“And if justice falters...”

He saw it again. That scene in his mind. It never left, a constant presence in his periphery, always ready to be beheld. It was a scene of a world soaked in the crimson light of the setting sun. Bitter rancor, spewed by countless mouths, echoed in the air. They rained down on a single figure, hunched alone over the guillotine. The blade fell, and so did her head. No... *He* let the blade fall. *He* had killed the princess.

She had to die. The execution was necessary. And right. It had to be. *He* had to be. Justice—his justice—must not falter. No matter the cost.

He shook his head.

“Your Majesty...” said Keithwood. “If words can still move you, could you please spare His Highness Echard’s life in exchange for my own?”

Sion frowned.

“Why? What is Echard to you? You were not close. Why do this for him?”

“Because if you kill him... If you kill your own brother, Your Majesty, you’ll truly become—”

“I have already become the king, Keithwood. I have a duty to rule this kingdom of Sunkland fairly and justly. That duty requires me to put Echard to death, so I must,” said Sion. “Besides...”

A brief silence followed, broken by a soft, steady, and unfeelingly cold voice.

“Goodbye, Keithwood. Thank you for everything.”

Thus, Sion became a paragon of kingship. He rid his judgment of all bias. All emotion. He forged it into a vessel of pure righteousness, concerned only with the fairness of its decisions. So he ruled, forever just, less man than ideal. When people came upon him, they lowered their gazes. Whether out of reverent awe for his unshakable rectitude...or fear for the void of humanity they saw...

Sion never married.

Humans needed company. Kings did not. He lived his whole life alone, as if attesting the ideal that for a King of Justice, company was an unaffordable luxury.

Tragedy has many forms, and its seeds, more still. Sion's life was one of them. So long as the seed remained within Sunkland's royal family, tragedies would continue to sprout. They might change their shape and shift their timing, but sooner or later, they would come. The assassination was a dire fruit, but still a fruit. It could be reaped, the event averted, but the seed would remain...

Who could dig deep into the soil of Sunkland and unearth its kernel of misfortune? Why, none other than our clueless princess and her band of merry companions, of course! She and her friends were in the very midst of confronting the swirling tendrils of catastrophe embedded within the Sunkland royal family! Could they unroot the cursed seedling once and for all?

"Hm... Is it just me or is this dress a little too tight around my waist? Did they mess up the measurement?"

Good question! The seedling one, that is. Not the measurement one.

"How terribly odd. I just had it made a few days ago too... Oh wait. Oho ho, I know. It's the weather here! I heard that cold can make things shrink. That must be what's going on here..."

It was a very, very good question.

Part 4: To the Moon-Led Morrow II Fin

To Be Continued in Part 4: To the Moon-Led Morrow III

Where Girls Talk, Romance Blooms

“Wow... Th-This is...” Mia gasped in wonder.

She stood in a clearing—almost a plaza of sorts—off the side of Pilgrimage Road, the wide avenue teeming with travelers and pilgrims that would take her to Sunkland. Also in the clearing was a large carriage, its doors adorned in golden ornamentation. It belonged to the Greenmoons, one of the Four Houses of the Tearmoon Empire, and its splendor matched its status.

But none of that was what Mia gasped at. In case anyone forgot, which is admittedly a very easy thing to do, Mia was the princess of a mighty empire. In terms of rank, she was even higher than Esmeralda. Riding in magnificent carriages like this was, to her, a mundane experience unworthy of remark. If anything, she wished she could scrap all these excessively elaborate vehicles to save on operating costs, but riding in too shabby a carriage would lead to lectures from Ludwig about how she was damaging Tearmoon’s image on the greater political stage, so she made it a point to take the big money-guzzlers out for a ride every so often when the occasion called for it.

So what, exactly, caused her to gasp?

“Fascinating... You can join two of them together?”

That’s right. Greenmoon’s horse carriages could be parked beside each other and connected horizontally, creating a convenient space that could be used as temporary lodging.

Even for the nobility, sleeping accommodation when traveling between towns was normally limited to simple tents. With carriages like these, however, the nights spent on the road would be far more comfortable.

Previously, when she’d boarded Esmeralda’s yacht, the Emerald Star, Mia’s interest in the vehicle had been limited. Her carriages, however, made her eyes sparkle. After all, the yacht wasn’t all that big, but these carriages were not only highly functional but also *spacious*. They were easily twice, if not more, the size of a regular carriage!

Which...was to be expected, considering it was two carriages joined together, but regardless, Mia was profoundly impressed. In general, she was fond of big, spacious things. This Greenmoon carriage very much tickled her fancy.

"Hm! The technical prowess of the Greenmoons never fails to amaze. What a marvelous design!"

Their deep connections to foreign nations made the Greenmoons a locus of all the latest technology. Some were of course head-scratchingly bizarre ideas for which no one could find any practical application, but there was never any shortage of useful inventions like the joint carriage.

Esmeralda let out a delighted laugh as Mia showered the vehicle with praise. "Oh, you flatter us, Miss Mia. It's nothing fancy. But please, do take a look inside."

With each individual carriage already on the larger side, the concatenated interior was incredibly roomy. Though it fell short of rivaling a royal chamber, it was at least the size of a room in an inn. Furthermore, the seats in the carriages were somehow retractable, as they were nowhere to be seen. The floor had become completely flat, and a soft, fluffy carpet had been placed on top. Mia sat down to give it the old stroke test and giggled in delight at its pleasant texture.

"How wonderfully comfortable. There's so much space—I bet we can fit all the girls in here," she said, gazing around her.

All the girls would include Esmeralda and her maid Nina, Mia and Anne, Bel and Citrina, and Tiona and Liora. It might feel a tad cramped to squeeze all eight of them in here, but it wasn't impossible. With that thought in mind...

"Say, Esmeralda. Why don't we get everyone in here for the night? It's not every day we get to have a group sleepover party, and this seems like the perfect opportunity. I'm sure it'll be lots of fun."

"Everyone in here? Hm..." Esmeralda frowned in surprise at the sudden proposition and folded her arms, pondering the idea. "I think...that's a great idea! It does sound fun!" Her expression soon brightened, and she nodded.

While she was for the most part the classic daughter of a high-ranking noble and held stereotypically traditional views, there was also an outlandishly sporty side to Esmeralda, as evidenced by her willingness to camp on a deserted island. What's more, the events of that camping trip had

apparently become a series of exceedingly enjoyable memories for her.

So, it was decided that all eight girls would gather in the carriage for the night. Cramped though it was, the occasional brushing of elbows and knees only invited more laughter, further buoying their mood.

“Oho ho, this really is very nice,” said Mia, relishing the jovial air.

Granted, a certain degree of tension remained from the knowledge that Sion’s life still hung in the balance. Addressing that was, after all, why they’d set out on this trip to begin with. That was that though, and this was this. If she allowed anxiety to encroach on every aspect of her life, she’d turn into a nervous wreck. When fun times were upon her, she figured she might as well enjoy them.

“Um, milady, are you sure this is appropriate?” asked a hesitant Anne.

Was it? To be honest, Mia didn’t really care.

“Anne, you’re my maid-in-waiting. Why do you even care? There’s no need to concern yourself with such matters. Right, Esmeralda?”

Having been queried, Esmeralda regarded Anne and said, “Quite right. You’re the proud maid-in-waiting of Miss Mia, so you should behave proudly as well. Besides, I, um... I owe you one from before, so... If you’re ever in trouble, feel free to ask me for help, okay?” Her voice steadily grew more sheepish as she spoke.

“Lady Esmeralda... Thank you very much.” Anne beamed and the atmosphere grew ever warmer.

“I must say,” said Mia after giving her maid an approving nod, “these carriages are built like fortresses, not to mention the guards...”

She lifted one of the armored plates and peered out at the roaming sentries. One of them noticed her looking and grinned back. It was a most reassuring sight.

“It’s very comforting to see such rigorous security being provided,” she commented.

“That’s true. We also have Dion Alaia accompanying us on this trip,” Citrina said, nodding. “No assassin will have any luck getting at us.” The resident anti-Serpent expert smiled.

Mia smiled back, though hers was more strained. “Yes, Dion Alaia... Having him around certainly tends to solve all security problems, but...”

Their placid conversation was then interrupted by a far grimmer voice. “That’s...not guaranteed.”

All eyes turned toward the speaker, Liora. The way her face was slightly turned downward as she peered through her bangs at Mia was a little creepy.

"Deep in the forest... Even with Dion Alaia... You might not be safe."

"My, is that so? The Lulu tribe must be home to some very skilled warriors," said Mia, recalling that troops led by Dion had once clashed with the Lulus in a fierce battle and paid dearly for it.

Liora, however, shook her head. "No... That's not it," she said in a low, hushed tone, glancing fearfully around herself before continuing. "It's because...deep in the forest...is where horrible monsters roam."

"...Huh?" It took a moment for Mia to process what she'd heard. Slowly, her brain crunched through the logic and realized...the conversation had taken a very worrying turn.

"My! You, you're Rudolvon's maid, right? Is that a spooky story I hear? Tell me more!"

More worryingly, it caught Esmeralda hook, line, and sinker. As evidenced during their time spent on the deserted island, Esmeralda *loved* a good spook with her tales.

Uh-oh. Not good. I need to change the topic right now, thought Mia with growing panic.

Before she could even object, Esmeralda glanced at her and said, "My, Miss Mia. Don't tell me you're *scared*?"

"S-Scared? M-Me? Absolutely not! H-How dare you suggest such a thing?!" said Mia, furrowing her brows in an expression that she hoped looked more indignant than terrified.

She wasn't *actually* scared, of course. That would be preposterous. But Anne was here, and she couldn't let her dear maid spend the night shuddering in fear. There was also the pair of juniors, Bel and Citrina. As the older and more mature figure, Mia had to be a responsible guardian, and no responsible guardian would allow young children to be exposed to terrifying tales.

So it was that Mia resolved to fight this great tide that was threatening to push the conversation toward spooky stories. The psychological wellness of her dear granddaughter was on the line. She would be her bulwark. She would defend her from—

A glance in Bel's direction revealed a face of excitement that rivaled

Esmeralda's. The young girl wasn't the slightest bit scared.

Meanwhile, Liora continued to tell her story.

"This is something...that we Lulus know... A tale we tell...from father to son...and mother to daughter... In the depths of the Sealence Forest...there is a path that leads...to the Forbidden Forest..."

The tide came, and it swallowed Mia whole.

It was dark and dreary.

"Mmm... Hm? Where...am I?" When Mia came to, she was standing deep in the middle of a forest. "M-My, how strange. Wasn't I...in the carriage a moment ago— Oh." Her confusion quickly cleared as a thought occurred to her. "Hah. I know what's going on. This is a dream of when I was running away from the revolutionary army and wandered into a forest."

With that realization came a sense of composure. This was no big deal. She'd been tormented by such nightmares before, but ultimately, they were nothing more than figments of her imagination.

"Hmph. If you think I'll keep getting scared by the same situation, then you'd better think again. I have survival expertise now."

That's right. This very experience had driven her to learn how to survive in a forest. The knowledge she gained had been further enriched by her time on the deserted island. She even knew which mushrooms were edible. In fact, this was the perfect chance to put her skills to the test! It'd be a rehearsal of sorts, allowing her to prepare for the real thing, should it ever come to pass. It was, in other words, time to find some delicious mushrooms! Her spirits emboldened, she was just about to set off when...

"Hm?"

Something didn't feel right. She scanned her surroundings again. Nothing but shadowy forest stretched in every direction. She could make out nothing but the dense, dark forms of countless trees towering over her like giants. Their branches were strangely long and their trunks twisted in a most unnatural fashion.

"This is so...creepy."

The sight made her hair stand on end. She rubbed her arms, feeling the goose bumps forming on them, and continued to regard her surroundings.

Something was definitely wrong.

That forest she'd wandered had definitely left her feeling a profound

sense of loneliness. Fear, as well, toward her captors. Now, what she felt was only fear, and it was toward the forest itself—rather, the *thing* in the forest. She didn't know what it was, but somehow, she felt like it was coming after her.

"What a terribly unpleasant feeling."

Gone was the desire to take advantage of this dream to do some adventuring. All she wanted to do now was to get out of this forest. She began looking for the exit.

Ssss... Ssss...

She heard the sound of rustling leaves.

Snap!

A branch cracked. Then another, louder. And another, louder still. *Something* was approaching.

"My... What might that be...?"

She nervously looked behind her.

"Eeeeeeeeek!"

Utter terror exploded from her in a shrill squeal. Trees gave way—no, were *made* to give way—to an even bigger tree. A gigantic one with two massive branches that it raised like arms before charging forward. A huge tree monster was coming after her!

"Eeeeeeek!"

She screamed and ran for dear life. Down a narrow trail through the woods she dashed, half-stumbling as she tried to dodge thick, twisting roots which stuck out in hazardous angles that seemed near-intentional. Fighting her way through brushes and thickets, she rushed to get out of the forest.

"Wait, which way is out?!" she screamed as she ran.

No answer was forthcoming. Meanwhile, the monster drew ever closer. A glance backward revealed a hole on its trunk that had opened like a giant maw. It was big enough to swallow her whole!

"Gaaaaaaaah! It's too fast! I can't get away! Noooooo!"

Just as she was about to give up, something split the air in front of her. An arrow shot past her with a sharp *shwiiick* and struck the monster with a loud thud.

"Your Highness... This way!"

"L-Liora?! What are you doing here?"

Up ahead, hidden in the shadow of a tree, was the figure of Liora with

bow in hand. Out of breath and utterly bewildered, Mia shambled as quickly as she could toward her.

"Liora, wh-what in the moons is that thing?"

"It is...the Thing... It lives in the Sealence Forest... Don't let it catch you...or bad things will happen..."

"Wh-What kind of bad things?"

"Very, very...bad things."

This very unhelpful repetition only added fuel to the raging fire that was Mia's fear-afflicted imagination.

"You need to get away...now," said Liora as she nocked another arrow.

"But...what about you?"

"I'll be fine... Just go... Now!"

"B-But..."

At Liora's urgent instruction, Mia...found herself conflicted. Was it okay for her to run off on her own? Or should she force Liora to come with her, even if she had to drag her away?

"To run or not to run, that is the question..."

So troubled was she by this problem that she began pondering it in earnest. She pondered and pondered, working her brain so hard that her head began to ache. She kept pondering. Her vision began to swim. Just when she thought she couldn't ponder any more...

"Your Highness... Your Highness..."

Mia felt her body being shaken. She opened her eyes.

"M-My... I must have fallen asleep."

"Was the story about the forest guardian...boring?"

She turned to find a crestfallen Liora. "Huh? N-No, it uh..."

Forced to think quickly, she immediately recalled the spooky story Liora just told. As a proficient practitioner of Anne's patented sleep-learning method, Mia could remember the things she heard while asleep.

"It was interesting, actually. Yes, very interesting..."

What she wanted to say was, "Moons, it literally gave me nightmares! What were you thinking, telling spooky stories at night?!" However, Liora did show up to save her in said nightmare, so she couldn't be too hard on the girl. More importantly, a quick glance revealed that nobody else seemed the slightest bit scared. Judging by the abundant smiles and laughter, they'd

all enjoyed the story. She didn't dare be the sole spoilsport.

"I enjoyed it a great deal."

Mia was no maverick; she was a devoted fitter-inner. If everyone was singing the story's praises, then she would too!

But this isn't good. Apparently, if someone tells a spooky story around me while I'm dozing off, I'll end up having a nightmare about it! I need to steer this conversation away from scary stuff right away!

They could tell any *other* story. As long as it wasn't scary, she could nod off without it worming its way into her dream. Probably. In any case, she needed to perform emergency conversation surgery!

How, though?

She considered her options. And considered. And considered...

Zzz...

"Ah!" She woke with a start. "Moons, that was close. I almost dozed off again..." she muttered as she gave her cheeks a quick slap. With it came a flash of inspiration.

Oh, I know! Everyone clearly likes spooky stories, but I bet they like romantic stories more! Nothing gets noble girls more excited than talking about girlfriends and boyfriends! In fact, I can just talk about my relationship with Abel. Won't that stop the conversation from turning toward scary stuff?

"Oho, that was quite the story, maid of Rudolvon, but you've still got some ways to go. Next, let me show you how it's done," said an eager Esmeralda.

Before she could begin, Mia held up a hand to stop her. "Actually, everyone, I have a suggestion. Spooky stories are well and good, but as gentlewomen, I think we should talk about topics that are more...productive."

"Hm?" Esmeralda frowned in puzzlement. "What's a productive topic for a gentlewoman?"

Mia smiled. "Why... Love, of course! And relationships! Would anyone like to hear some stories about the dates I went on with Prince Abel?" she said, emphasizing the "Prince."

"My! I'd love to!"

She, too, managed to get Esmeralda hook, line, and sinker.

Not that I'm complaining, but it's really easy to bait Esmeralda, isn't it?

She bites at anything.

Said the princess you could lure with a cube of sugar on a string. In terms of biting at things, Mia was just as much a sucker for sweets. Maybe it ran in the blood or something.

"I want to know too, Miss Mia!" Bel was equally interested. "How were your dates with Grand— Prince Abel?"

The girl's tastes usually skewed more toward Sion and Keithwood, but that didn't stop her from leaping at the chance to hear about the romance between Grandpa Abel and her esteemed grandmother. Maniabel was no picky eater; she consumed a balanced diet of gossip.

"Oho ho. Well, we sometimes head out to town to go window shopping, but mostly, we go for long rides on horseback."

Thus, Mia began to passionately describe her horseback dates with Abel in extreme detail.

"When we're riding beside each other, we sometimes go on quick races. The time we tried to beat each other to the shore of Noelige Lake was a lot of fun. The wind you feel on horseback when you're close to the lake... It's sublime."

Riding alongside Abel, sharing his laughter while the lake breeze grazed her cheeks... Scene after scene of pure bliss scrolled through her mind, causing a rather unseemly grin to spread across her lips.

"When we sit together on one horse—oh, let me tell you!—that's when I get his heart *really* pounding. Abel might look like he's fooling around all the time, but deep down, he's actually pretty straitlaced. I bet he's never ridden tandem with a girl before, judging by how nervous he gets. You can tell right away. He goes stiff from head to toe. Of course, that only makes him more adorable."

For the record, if questioned about the same experience, Abel would have given the exact same answer, except with the names reversed. Probably something along the lines of "Mia just sat there like a statue the whole time. I guess she's a lot more innocent than she appears."

When you gaze into the abyss, the person you were making fun of gazes right back at you.

"I see, I see," said Bel with the tone of a scholar engaging in academic discourse. "Do you kiss on horseback too? Or do you get down first?"

She dropped that bombshell of a question with the straightest of faces.

“K-K-Kiss?! W-We’d never do something so immodest! It’s way too early for that! Right, Rina?”

Citrina, who’d been content to just listen and smile, hesitated at this sudden question.

“Uh...” She tilted her head, lips pursed in thought. Then, with a nod of newfound insight, she said, “That’s right, Bel. It’d be improper to do so. Kissing is for after you get married, so if any strange men try to convince you otherwise, make sure you don’t listen to them. Just walk away, okay?”

She promptly educated Bel in matters of feminine modesty so she’d grow up to be a proper maiden.

“Really?” Bel frowned in surprise. “But I heard that my grandmother’s first time was—” She paused, cutting herself off. “Never mind. I probably remembered wrong.”

Bel then nodded in the same manner as Citrina. That look of newfound insight on her granddaughter’s face bugged Mia a little, but she pushed it aside to continue her story.

“Anyway, as I was saying... We rarely ever leave the island, so someday, I’d like to go somewhere far with just the two of us. We’ll ride and ride across an endless field of grass... What a wonderful date that would be,” said Mia, continuing to expound on her romantic excursions.

Tiona listened with a gentle expression. At a certain point, however, she frowned as a thought occurred to her. “But in that case, make sure to be very careful, Your Highness.”

“Huh? Be careful of what?”

“The abandoned village that must never be entered. It’s a very scary place. Haven’t you heard of it?”

“The...what?” Mia frowned, not sure whether she wanted to know the answer.

“It’s pretty well-known in the Rudolvon domain. Apparently, somewhere out there is an empty village where no one lives, and if you accidentally wander in...”

And so, due to Tiona’s intervention, the conversation segued back to spooky stories with upsetting swiftness.

Wh-What the— How did she do that? Augh, I let my guard down for one second, and this is what happens!

With everyone’s attention already trained on Tiona, it was too late to

stop her. Again, Mia didn't want to be a party pooper.

But it's okay. I already know how to deal with this, and the solution is simple. I just have to make sure I don't doze off. After all, if I don't sleep, I can't have nightmares. All right, let's do this! It's time to stay awake!

Her mental pep talk proved effective, giving her the energy she needed to keep herself alert. She did not sleep, nor did she suffer any nightmares. Instead, she ended up listening to Tiona's spooky story from beginning to end while fully awake.

After enduring every last spooky detail of Tiona's story about the abandoned village...

"Oho ho ho, not bad, Miss Tiona. Not bad at all. I commend your performance," said Esmeralda with an expression of profound satisfaction.

It delighted her to add a new item to her stock of spooky stories. Doubtlessly, she intended to relay this fresh tale to her tea buddies.

"Thank you very much," replied Tiona, lowering her head before turning to Mia and adding, "And that's why you should be cautious when you go on long rides, Your Highness. Do be careful, okay?"

The worry on her face was serious and sincere.

Mia, for her part, was feeling more along the lines of "Moons, would you all stop it with the spooky stories already?!" Seeing that Tiona had meant for it to be a cautionary tale, however, forced her to swallow her grievance. After all, she couldn't fault Tiona for being concerned for her safety.

"V-Very well. That was a...most fascinating story. If I ever come across an abandoned village like that during my rides, I'll have to be careful..." said Mia, trying hard not to whimper.

Something's not right...

She found herself bewildered by the course of events.

We were supposed to be talking about love and relationships... So how come I ended up suffering through another scary story? I don't get it. This isn't fair at all.

Just then, Bel spoke up. "Oh, by the way, Miss Mia, there's something I wanted to ask you."

"Oh? What is it?"

"I know you danced with Prince Sion a few times, so... I was wondering

what it was like. Is he a good dancer?"

"Hm... You *would* wonder, wouldn't you?" murmured Mia, recalling Bel's obsession with Sion. "His dancing, huh...?" She folded her arms and grumbled in thought to herself for a bit before answering. "His dancing...is the kind that drives you up the wall. It doesn't matter how hard the routine is. He always does it perfectly. And makes it look like he's enjoying it, to boot. Not only can he meet all my expectations, he sometimes surpasses them. On top of that, he pays enough attention to my steps to help improve the quality of my performance too. It's the kind of dance where, in the midst of it, it feels magical...but once you're done, you want to punch something."

There you have it. The expert opinion of Mia, professional dance critic. But wait! She wasn't done!

"In comparison, dancing with Abel is just pure bliss. His dancing is the kind that makes you want to root for him because of how hard he always tries. Every time he dances, he gets a little better. Seeing his improvement always puts a smile on my face."

"I see, I see... So that's how Grand— Prince Abel dances. It's exactly how I imagined," said Bel, nodding to herself.

"There's also Sapphias, I guess. He's a lot better at dancing than he seems. I've seen him at dance parties before, and well, his fiancée has clearly whipped him into shape."

"That, I agree with," said Esmeralda. "He's very conscious of his partner. He always seems so clueless, so it's quite the shock to see how considerate a dancer he is."

"On that note, Bel, you should be careful of Keithwood," added Mia. "He's very proficient on the dance floor, but there's something about his dancing that feels...impersonal. Like he's just going through the motions. I get the feeling that he's been around the block a few times."

Citrina nodded her agreement. "That's right, Bel. Men who are womanizers might seem like really nice people at first, so you need to be very careful," she said with deeply furrowed brows.

"I feel like Keithwood the Loyal should be pretty safe to be around...but okay, I'll be careful." Despite her qualms about his characterization, Bel accepted the advice.

"But at the end of the day," Mia continued, "the most important thing is

your own dance skill. I taught you the Dance of Moonlight, right? Just keep practicing the basic motions of that routine, and you'll naturally get better."

"Uh... You mean like this, right?" Bel wiggled her arms, presumably in an attempt to reproduce the said motions. It was...questionably faithful.

"You know, Bel... You have a habit of learning things really sloppily, and you should really do something about it." Mia sighed. "Look, I'm going to show you again. You have to start with the fingertips, like this."

She'd barely begun her demonstration when Citrina suddenly said, "By the way, Your Highness, have you heard of the story about the shadow that does a creepy dance?"

"The...shadow that does a creepy dance? I don't think so."

At first, Mia gave Citrina a puzzled look. Then, it hit her. The conversation was yet again heading in a dangerous direction.

"R-Rina, might that be a story of the spooky sort?"

"They call it the boogie-boogie..."

Mia arched an eyebrow. "The 'boogie-boogie'? It doesn't sound very scary..."

Citrina smiled gently. "It's not scary at all."

So, she proceeded to tell the tale about how one day, when she was riding in a carriage, she looked out into a field, and in the middle of it...was a spooky dancing shadow!

It was *definitely* scary.

"—Highness? Your Highness?"

"M-Mmm..." Mia groaned, feeling her body being shaken. Slowly, she opened her eyes. The worried face of Anne appeared in view. "Wh-Where am I... Hm?"

She looked around to find herself inside a carriage. Beside her, breaths still peaceful with slumber, was Esmeralda. Curled into a ball at her feet was Bel, who lay beside her friend, Citrina. Both young girls were asleep, though the latter in a far more seemly manner.

"Oh... I must have dozed off early again. That must mean it was all a dream... Hm?"

Mia frowned. All of *what*? The particulars escaped her. She couldn't recall what Citrina's story had been about, though she felt like it had been very, very scary.

Anne smiled at her. “Are you all right, milady? You looked very restless. Were you having a nightmare?”

“Yes, I suppose, although I can’t seem to remember what it was about. I just know it was very scary. Something about a shadow that does a creepy dance...”

“A creepy dance? Hmm... You mean...”

It was then that Mia realized something disturbing. Anne’s voice...wasn’t right. It sounded...scary, somehow.

“...Like this?”

“Eeeeeeek!”

Mia screamed before she even looked, but she looked nonetheless. There, before her, was Anne doing the dance! The creepy dance! The—

Actually, it just looked sort of weird. Not really creepy.

“U-Um, Anne? What...is that supposed to be?”

“Oh, it’s the Dance of Moonlight that you taught us last night. I think it went something like this.”

Anne held her arms and legs at decidedly odd angles and wiggled them. The effect was so bizarre, Mia couldn’t help but burst out in laughter.

“Oh, Anne. That’s not it,” she said, giggling through the words. “That won’t do at all. You’ll probably be looking after my children in the future, so I’ll have to teach you properly some day.”

“Hmm? Who’s teaching what now?” asked Esmeralda, who’d woken up and was regarding them with intense curiosity.

“Oh, it’s, uh, nothing important. Don’t worry about it.”

“My! Miss Mia! Are you going to keep something from your *best friend*?” Esmeralda said, her expression visibly hurt.

“No, I was just talking about teaching Anne to dance...”

“My! That sounds delightful! You must allow me to partake in this as well!”

She really does bite at anything, doesn’t she? You don’t even need a hook. Mia shook her head. Soon after, however, she was overcome by a wave of sentimentalism.

This gathering before her, she realized, was something very special. Here was a girl who'd once betrayed Mia, fleeing the empire with her clan and kin. A girl she thought she'd never forgive, much less have any desire to associate with again. Behind her were two more girls, Tiona and Liora, whom Mia had wanted to stay far away from—the farther the better. Moreover, there was Citrina who, despite having had no direct contact with Mia, was probably deeply involved in her eventual death. Finally, snoozing ever so comfortably to her side was Bel, who'd come from a future that had already fallen into ruin.

What an extraordinary group of members to be going on a trip with.

They'd been her hated enemies. Her objects of gall and wormwood. And she'd just spent a night with them, making merry with fanciful tales of spooks and spirits. It was the most surreal of situations, as marvelous as it was bizarre. There was a dreamlike wonder to the atmosphere. Perhaps that was why she felt...a tad more charitable than usual.

"All right then. Have it your way, Esmeralda. When the time comes, you can join us. In fact, we should invite Tiona and Liora as well. Rina too. We can set up something like a dance society with everyone."

It sounded like great fun. So much so that the very act of imagining it put a grin on her lips. She lowered her head to hide her private glee.

Hm, in that case, we'll all need dance partners. I'll ask Abel to come, of course, but probably Keithwood too. He seems like the kind of guy who can handle any dance we throw at him. Sapphias is another decent choice. And Sion...

She thought of the crown prince of Sunkland and his infuriatingly savvy dancing, meeting every pivoting call with a perfect, swiveling answer.

It...would be best if he were there. Everyone would have a better time. She sighed inwardly. *I guess I have no choice. I'll have to invite him too. Which means...*

She looked back up, her gaze now distant, but focused. Somewhere far, far away, in the direction she now looked, was Sion...

I have to stop this assassination... So that everyone can dance to their hearts' content...

Thus continued Mia and her friends on their journey toward Sunkland. As for what awaited her there... She—and everyone else—would simply

have to wait to find out.

Mia's Diary —The Gastronome's Guide to Tearmoon—

The Seventeenth Day of the Eighth Month

I had a pot of stewed forest delights cooked for me by Tiona's maid, Liora. Apparently, it's a fusion of food traditionally made by Rudolvon's farmers with the Lulu Tribe's cuisine. It had some hare meat that had been prepared a few days ago (Liora apparently hunted it herself. Hiring a Lulu for an attendant sounds like a pretty good way to make sure I never go hungry in a famine. Mental note: maybe I need to discuss this with the Lulu chief later?) It also had some thinly sliced jerky and a bunch of vegetables that were roughly chopped up.

I was told that there's no hard-and-fast rule about what vegetables to put in. What matters is using fresh ones that you just got. A pot filled with vegetables that were just bought from a nearby village doesn't make for a very refined flavor, but there's a wonderfully rustic appeal to it.

The way the thick flavor of hare mixed with all the other ingredients imparted a richness to the stew that really elevated it. I very much enjoyed the pot of forest delights.

Highly recommended ☆x5

The Eighteenth Day of the Eighth Month

I had a pot of exquisite seafood stew cooked for me by Esmeralda's maid, Nina. Apparently, she took yesterday's stew from the Rudolvons as some sort of challenge. To be clear, we brought Greenmoon chefs with us on the trip, and they've been cooking for us every day. Somehow, though, she got it into her head that it was important for it to be cooked by a maid, so she insisted on having Nina do it. I swear, sometimes, Esmeralda can be such a handful.

Nina's cooking, though! That was superb as always. In fact, I now realize how much of a handicap she was working with on the deserted

island. With a proper selection of ingredients, her cooking is on another level. She started with a soup base that had spices from Greenmoon's special stock. Then, she put in dried seafood. Finally, she added some fluffy, spongy things made from flour, which sucked up a lot of the soup. Eating them was interesting. You have to roll them around on your tongue and breathe out because they're steaming hot, but when you bite in and the juices flow, it's indescribable—a unique type of deliciousness I've never experienced before.

Also, the texture of dried shellfish resembled mushrooms, which made them excellent.

I felt like I got a taste of some sort of secret Greenmoon recipe passed down through the generations. It was absolutely brilliant.

Highly recommended ☆x5

The Nineteenth Day of the Eighth Month

Is it just me, or is a good eighty percent of my diary about food? I sit down to write, and before I know it, I'm writing about food. It just keeps happening, and I cannot for the life of me figure out why. I'm really starting to think I might be afflicted by some sort of curse.

Anyway, today, I'm going to be serious and write a proper entry.

I went on an inspection of the Princess Guard today. They're always working hard to keep me safe, so it's important for me to know how they're going about their duties. After all, they're my shield. When I'm in a pinch, they're the ones I rely on to protect me. It's very much necessary to ensure they have a pleasant work environment and their morale is high.

So, I had them show me their horses and equipment. When they were briefing me on their maintenance procedures, I suddenly started wondering if they were eating well. For soldiers, good food is crucial for good morale. I figured it'd be a good chance to see what they were eating.

It was not because I smelled something tasty, in case anyone's wondering.

Anyway, I ended up having some of their food, and I couldn't believe it! It's a thing called battlefield stew, and it's apparently a favorite of many soldiers. I'd describe it as looking like a form of pumpkin stew. It was yellow and creamy, and when I had a sip, I was shocked by how spicy it was.

Bel was with me, so she had some too, and she started tearing up with a single sip. It might have been a bit too spicy for children, but not for me. I could taste the complex flavors underneath the spiciness.

The vegetables in the stew had been in there for a long time, so they were really soft. The carrots almost melted in my mouth. The fullmoon onions basically had already dissolved in the pot, but that didn't make them any less important! They added complexity to the stew and contributed to its overall richness.

Apparently, it was great for dipping bread into, so I tried it. That lessened the spiciness and brought out the other flavors more.

If the soldiers are eating things like this every day, there can't possibly be any problems with their morale, right? If anything, it was sort of upsetting that they were eating such good food, and I'd never gotten to try it before.

It was a good reminder, though, of the fact that there are still so many delicious foods in this world that I'm not aware of.

Wait... Is it just me or am I writing about food again?

What an absolutely perplexing phenomenon...

Afterword

Hello, I'm Mochitsuki, and it's good to see you again.

In this volume, Mia's crew go on a trip to the Kingdom of Sunkland, which is a place whose name has been showing up in the story since the first volume. What new cuisines await her there? Hm? What was that, you say? I'm missing the point?

Anyway, on a separate note, I had a dream the other day. I dreamt that I went to an abandoned theme park. It was built with the theme of European castles, and lots of big castles had been relocated there. Some of them stood on elevated ground and looked like mountain fortresses. It was truly the kind of place I dream of going to.

One day, I'd like to build a theme park like that.

While roaming around in my dream, I was like, "I can use this as a reference for Tearmoon! I need to come back here again! I didn't think they'd actually let me in. This is going to make it so much easier to write about castles! Yay!"

I regret not taking a better look at the castle interiors while I had the chance...

Mia: "Ah... Yes, those kinds of dreams are pretty common. I dreamt of a castle the other day too."

Mochitsuki: "Oh? A castle, you say? But Princess Mia, you live in a castle, so they're not anything special to you, right? Wait... Don't tell me it was one of those classic 'castle made of candy' dreams?"

Mia: "I wish. In that case, I'd just eat it without a second thought. The castle I dreamed of was an abandoned one with mushrooms growing out of it in all sorts of places!"

Mochitsuki: "No way!"

Mia: "Why couldn't it have been a castle filled with cream? I mean, the mushrooms looked delicious, but they were still mushrooms, so I couldn't eat them raw. I wanted to ask someone to cook them for me, but there was

nobody around...”

Mochitsuki: “ I see. Well, I guess seeing things you want to eat and not being able to eat them is a staple of dreams. Having the obstacle to eating them be the fact that they have to be cooked feels pretty rare though.”

Mia: “It made me so sad that I’m going to start studying how to make mushroom cuisine. I’m serious about this!”

And that was how Mia hardened a new resolve. A dubiously valuable one, but a new resolve nonetheless.

Now, some words of appreciation.

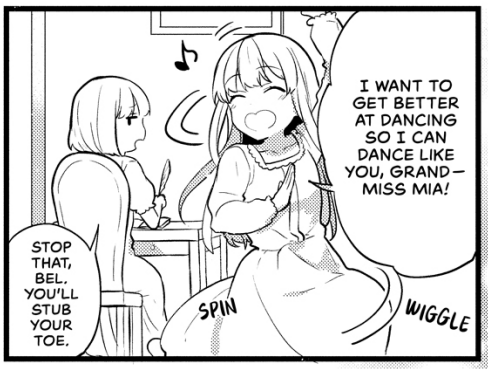
Thank you to Gilse for the adorable illustrations. The cover art of Mia dancing is so much fun! Thank you very much!

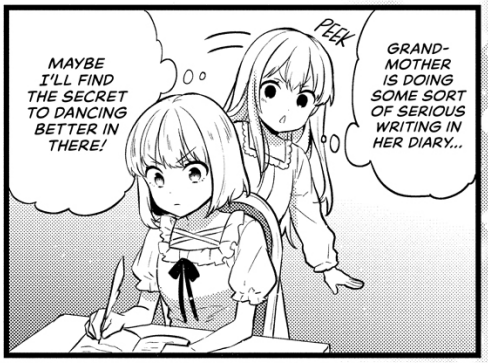
Thank you to my editor, F. Your valuable critique and thoughtful comments are very much appreciated. They encourage me to keep writing.

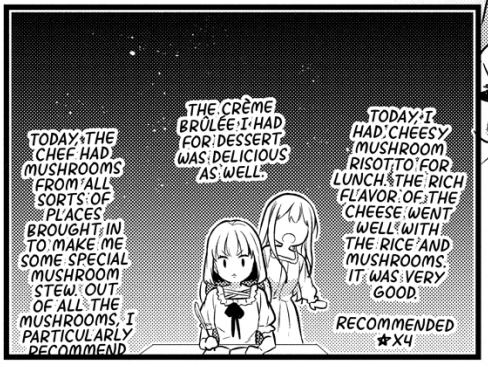
To my family, thank you for your ongoing support. I’m going to continue doing this for a little longer.

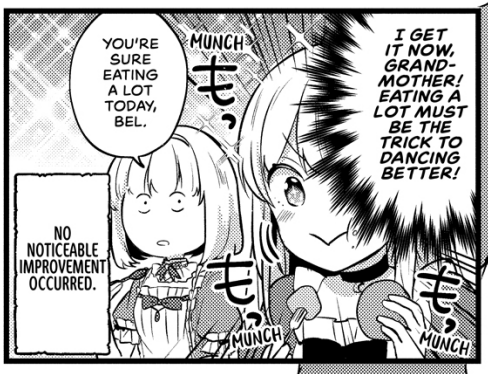
Finally, to all the readers who picked up this book, thanks to your support, it looks like we’ll be able to keep publishing these stories. I hope you’ll keep reading both these books and the manga. Thank you all again.

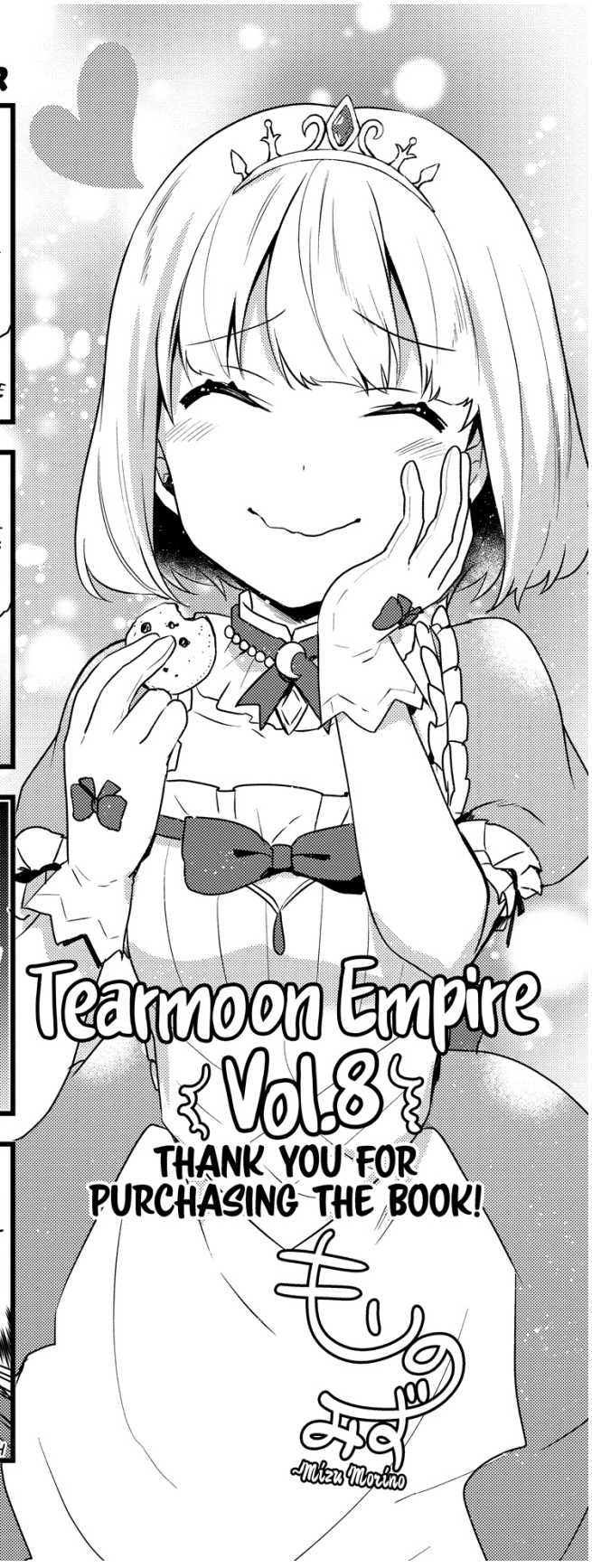
THE SECRET TO DANCING BETTER











Bonus Short Story

Princess Mia's Project X —The Quest for the Infinity Cake—

"Hnnngh..."

A groan was heard from a room in the Whitemoon Palace. Mia, having returned from Perujin, lay in her luxurious bed, trying in vain to collect her thoughts.

"This...is a tough problem..."

She turned onto her side, then the other side. Still, her thoughts refused to be collected. Nevertheless, she kept trying, and trying...and trying...and...

She gasped and hastily slapped her cheeks a few times in an attempt to drive off the slumber that had almost taken her. "Ugh, this is no good. I need to think of something, or this brilliant idea I just had will go to waste."

Inspiration had struck during her eat-till-you-drop tour of Perujin cuisine. What if, she'd thought, she started a faculty of food in Mia Academy where they'd study, well, food? Then, when Anne had made castillas for her, the idea had evolved further.

"Those castillas were so good, and they didn't even need normal wheat. Also, they apparently only had a little bit of sugar in them... Who knew such cakes could be made?"

Their existence was like a ray of hope.

"Tatiana keeps telling me that I'll get sick if I'm eating sweets all the time because too much sugar is bad for me...but if there are cakes like that, then..."

Mia, you see, had a dream. She dreamed of one day living in a cake castle, where she'd spend every day eating nothing but cakes. There would be cakes for breakfast, cakes for lunch, cakes after her noontime nap, and cakes for supper. If she could somehow do this without ruining her health, then surely, she'd have discovered heaven on earth.

"The head chef said even his vegetable cakes had to be eaten in moderation, but what if, instead of wheat and sugar, they could be made

with healthy ingredients? Then my dream of eating only cakes every day might actually come true!"

Said heaven, she now realized, might actually exist on said earth! And it was all thanks to Anne. Her invaluable efforts in creating the wheatless, sugarless castilla had smashed Mia's preconceived notions of what cakes could be, opening her eyes to a whole new world of possibilities.

"What we need right now is research. Anne couldn't have made such a brilliant castilla without coming to Perujin, where they spend a lot of time researching food. Therefore, the first step toward making my dream come true should be setting up a specialized faculty in my academy to study cooking."

Surely, there were still many ingredients out there, spread throughout the many nations in the continent, that Mia did not know about. There they lay, dormant and untapped. If she could somehow harness their yet-unknown properties, perhaps she could create the ultimate cake—a cake that one could eat every day to their heart's content, and then some.

"Hmm... A project to develop a cake that can be eaten all the time... Indefinitely and infinitely... Hm. I think I'll call it the Infinity Cake Project." She nodded to herself, enjoying the ring of the name. Soon, however, a frown clouded her expression. "But wait... There's a problem. How am I supposed to get people on board with this project? 'Go work your butts off researching cuisines so I can eat cake all day' isn't exactly the greatest of sales pitches."

Ludwig was certainly going to have none of it. Anne would probably give her a good scolding too. Most importantly, she doubted she could convince the head chef, who was a big proponent of eating balanced meals. The thought of presenting her questionable logic to that bear of a man was a tad too daunting...

"Which means... What I call the project will be pretty important, so I need to be careful. I definitely need to keep 'cake' out of the name. 'Infinity' seems risky too. If I leave it in, someone like Ludwig might catch on... Instead of 'infinity,' maybe it should be something like... X. Yes, that's it! I'll call it Project X!"

At last, in a moment of triumph, she thought of the perfect name.

"Granted, the project does have *some* merits. The ultimate goal might be sort of questionable, but to get there, we'll have to research the cuisines of

other nations, and that can't be a bad thing. For now, the project will aim to improve our basic cooking techniques. It'll be a long road, but as long as the ultimate cake exists at the end of that road, it's okay. This is just the first step."

With her mind made up, she promptly sent a letter off to the academy's headmaster, Galv.

"Next... I'll also need *his* help," she murmured, thinking of the head chef. "He's the one who invented the vegetable cake, after all. If I want a new cake, his skills will be crucial."

The head chef of the imperial court, Musta Waggman, was a person she definitely needed to recruit. Shortly after speaking to him, however, she turned her attention to something that promptly ousted everything else from her mind.

"Right, then. I think it's time I gave the Chronicles a quick peek."

What she discovered in it...was a little something called *the assassination of Sion Sol Sunkland*.

That day, Balthazar Brandt was visiting Saint Mia Academy. As an official of the Scarlet Moon Ministry, which oversaw local governance within the empire, he considered it his job to eradicate the plague of anti-agriculturalism that had infested the empire. It was, however, a doozy of a job, possibly the biggest he'd had in years, and he'd need every help he could get. To that end, he considered it imperative to maintain as close a coordination with Saint Mia Academy as possible. There were of course some people in the Scarlet Moon Ministry who were skeptical of the academy, but, well, Balthazar had neither the time nor desire to care about their opinions.

"Plus, this job is a request from an old, important friend. It's worth breaking a leg or two."

Though he framed it as a favor for his friend, deep down, he was also enjoying the sense of fulfillment that came with the work he was currently doing.

As he stepped with familiar steps into the headmaster's office, however, he arched an eyebrow. His old master, the renowned wiseman Galv, was staring at a parchment with a deep frown.

"What seems to be the matter, O wise master Galv?"

“Ah...” Galv slowly looked up from the parchment. “You have come, O wise pupil Balthazar.”

What humor there was in his phrasing was drowned out by a deep sigh. The creases across his brow deepened.

“Is something wrong?” asked Balthazar, surprised by this rare display of frustration from his old master. “I didn’t think there would be a problem that could trouble the likes of you.”

“It’s not a *problem*,” Galv answered. “It’s frustration. I’m lamenting the shallowness of my own wisdom.”

He dropped the parchment onto the desk and slid it toward Balthazar.

“This is...”

It turned out to be a letter, and the one who’d penned it was none other than the person who’d appointed Galv to the role of headmaster.

“A letter from Her Highness? I see... So she wants a faculty to research foreign cuisines.” Balthazar drew a pensive breath. “Fascinating. That’s not something I’ve ever considered. Now that I think about it though, that could indeed be useful when welcoming foreign envoys.”

When foreign envoys came to Tearmoon, it was customary to treat them to Tearmoon cuisine. However, Mia was calling into question the wisdom of this practice.

“For those weary from travel, the culinary welcome they would most appreciate is surely not the foreign cuisine of Tearmoon but the flavors of their native land. If even a single dish tastes like home, it will likely do wonders for their mood, which will in turn facilitate productive negotiation,” said Balthazar, his head lowered in thought. “That’s about as much as I can fathom in terms of Her Highness’s intentions.”

Even within the empire, culinary habits varied slightly from domain to domain, and it was his job as an official of the Scarlet Moon Ministry to visit those domains. He’d have no business working there if he couldn’t enjoy those differences in reception. Still, he’d be lying if he hadn’t felt the occasional yearning during his travels for a dish from his hometown.

“The broadness of her viewpoint, the way she considers issues from the perspective of others... It is but another reminder that she is truly the Great Sage of the Empire.”

Balthazar slowly looked back up to find Galv gazing quietly at the letter. “Am I wrong in some way?”

“No, you’re not wrong... I thought the same as you at first. Food and crops are inextricably linked, so if Mia Academy, as an educational institution, is going to preach the importance of agriculture, then it’s reasonable to start a program for learning how to cook. Perhaps even necessary. But the question is... Is that all?”

“What do you mean, master? Does this letter contain some hidden meaning not apparent to me?”

Galv pointed at a line in the letter. Balthazar eyed it. “Project X...? What is this supposed to mean?”

“Think about it, Balthazar. Her Highness is a woman whose mind works on many levels. Every action she takes often has many layers of meaning to it. Shouldn’t we assume, then, that this Project X is also more than meets the eye? That there’s more to the name...”

“X... What could it mean? An initial? An acronym? I’m not sure.”

“It had been gnawing at my mind until some time ago, while pondering it, an answer suddenly occurred to me...and it left me speechless.”

“You figured it out? What’s the answer?” Balthazar leaned forward, intrigued by the riddle.

Galv leaned back, pleased by the reaction. “X represents a cross,” he explained, putting one finger across another to illustrate his point. “In other words, an intersection of two things. The next question is naturally, what two things? Let’s assume one is Mia Academy. What could the other be?”

He paused for dramatic effect before continuing.

“Something, perhaps, with influence over foreign affairs and education. Something like...the House of Greenmoon. I believe this is Her Highness asking us to mend relations with the Greenmoons.”

The corner of his lip turned up ever so smugly as he finished his speech. Balthazar, blindsided by both the unexpected interpretation and the confidence with which it was delivered, was left dumbfounded. But only for a second. His thoughts quickly resumed their usual activity.

“I see... It’s true that relations between the House of Greenmoon and Mia Academy remain frigid. There’s been no communication whatsoever. That was careless of us...”

Duke Greenmoon and his house held significant sway over academia. Their proud Etoiline, Esmeralda, had tried to throw a wrench into the works during Mia Academy’s inception. Her sabotage had resulted in a number of

lecturers pulling out of the arrangement, leaving the academy with a staffing crisis. Fortunately, thanks to Galv's efforts, the damage was mostly mitigated, but the incident had resulted in an estrangement between the academy and the Greenmoons that continued to this day.

Circumstances, however, had changed.

According to Ludwig, the prime perpetrator of the incident, Esmeralda, was once again on good terms with Mia. If anything, after the new oath sworn in the winter, they were even closer than before. Despite these developments, Saint Mia Academy and the House of Greenmoon remained divorced, creating a significant obstacle to hiring talented lecturers from Tearmoon. That was detrimental to both the academy and its students.

"If we're going to research foreign cuisines," Balthazar said musingly, "not making use of Greenmoon's diplomatic know-how would be absurd. We could actively request their help, and in doing so, give them a chance to make amends and clear their name, ultimately allowing us to resume a cooperative arrangement..."

"Correct. What you previously suggested is goal number one. Repairing relations with the Greenmoons is goal number two. Cross these two goals, and you get...Project X. The meaning, the mission, her instructions to us—it's all in the name."

Though technically conjecture, Galv's logic was highly convincing.

"I have no words..." Balthazar let out an impassioned sigh. "All I can say is that like the moon in the sky, the radiant wisdom of Her Highness never falters."

Galv did not join in the Mia-praising. Instead, his gaze grew sharper. "It seems...Her Highness is serious about this."

"About what?"

Galv stroked his beard pensively. "Serious about...making Saint Mia Academy not only the number one school in Tearmoon, but the best in the continent. She intends for us to represent the pinnacle of education, on par with Saint-Noel."

Goosebumps formed on Balthazar's arms.

The best in the business. The greatest in the continent. Many an educational facility had been built with such goals in mind. Every kingdom and country could rattle off a list of their schools that had hoisted such banners during their inception. None had ever succeeded.

But this time, it was Mia doing the building, and she was *serious*.

"Then, with the prestige and influence that would garner us, she intends to revolutionize Tearmoon's attitude toward agriculture. That is what I have surmised from this letter," concluded Galv.

"I see. So it's a play for clout..."

What Mia needed was perceived authority. She had things to say, but she needed them to not be spoken through the mouths of lecturers in some second-rate school cobbled together by a princess on a whim, but declared by professors in one of the most prominent teaching institutions in the continent with the backing of Tearmoon's entire academia. The academy was going to be the symbol and vanguard of an ideological revolution in agricultural attitudes. When it spoke, people needed to listen. Her goal was to make sure they did.

"And that, dear Balthazar, is my dilemma."

The odd comment pulled Balthazar out of his thoughts. "Your dilemma? What dilemma? This is one of the most worthwhile projects I've ever heard of. What could possibly be holding you back?"

Galv gave him a playful wink. "My dilemma...is that I was thinking of retiring in a year or two to clear the way for younger talent, but how can I do so with something so exciting on the horizon?"

Balthazar stared at his master for a second, then rolled his eyes and sighed.

Meanwhile... Let's take a look at what the other vital piece of Mia's Infinity Cake project—aka Project X—was doing.

"Learning to cook in school, huh..." Musta Waggman murmured as he mulled over the idea Mia presented to him earlier. "Cooking isn't really an academic subject, though..."

Cooking was a skill. A trade. The world of cooking was one of craftsmen. People who sought masters to apprentice themselves and leeched off their expertise until they were sufficiently skilled to strike out on their own. These were people who lived and died by their tongue—their tool and weapon that they would hone to perfection. The idea of being taught—in a *school*, at that—was alien. It didn't feel right.

Given this context, it was therefore understandable for Musta's enthusiasm for the idea to be lacking. Moreover, Mia hadn't asked for any

specific help. She'd simply mentioned that she might come to him for advice somewhere down the line. So, he figured he'd think about it when the time came, and put the matter out of his mind.

Until some time later, when the matter invited itself back in.

"What am I looking at...? Are these even bread?" Musta Waggman's disgusted voice echoed through the wide kitchen of the Whitemoon Palace.

"Head chef, um..." The younger cook working under him wore a deep frown. Before them were a number of different breads.

Musta sampled one of them and let out a deep sigh. "I assume these are all failed attempts?"

The issue was their dry, crumbly texture. They were also stiff and fairly bland, but the biggest problem was definitely their poor mouthfeel. It immediately gave off the impression of bread made with low quality wheat.

"Where did you get this wheat from?"

"From the regular town markets, sir. It's in circulation everywhere. It's also got a notoriously bad reputation among both buyers and sellers, so I got curious..." The younger cook scratched his head and grimaced. "Apparently, the usual wheat we use had a poor harvest this year, so there's less of it on the market. Thanks to this substitute wheat, we're not facing any shortages, but, I mean..."

He eyed his unappetizing creations and bit his lip. Musta's gaze, meanwhile, had shifted toward the bag of flour.

"Mia No. 2..." Musta's brows furrowed. "I see... So this is what Her Highness was growing in the academy city..."

News of the wheat had spread far and wide. It was now common knowledge that Princess Mia had developed a new strain of wheat that was resistant to cold as one of her famine countermeasures. Unfortunately, its taste left much to be desired.

"This wheat has Her Highness's name on it... For it to be considered a low-quality product... No, that simply won't do." The words left Musta without his conscious command. "I won't allow it!" He found himself incensed, almost outraged.

Knowing her, she might not care about this at all, but... He could already imagine her telling him that there was no need to be upset. That so long as mouths were fed, and health and lives were preserved, then she didn't mind

her wheat bearing an inglorious title.

But even so...

“Since this wheat is different from the kinds we’ve used before, we can try changing the ratio. Also the bake time, the strength of the flame, the amount of water... There are a ton of factors we can experiment with. An unpalatable creation is the result of insufficient effort. Blaming it on the ingredients—on the wheat—would be a disgrace to our names as culinary craftsmen,” he declared.

He rose, his voice not loud but resonant with conviction. Thus, the culinary craftsmen of the imperial court accepted their challenge...only to be faced with a very, very high wall that defied their attempts to scale it.

“Head chef, maybe it’s just impossible to make this stuff into good bread?”

Soon, all his subordinate cooks had given up. He himself was also on the verge of throwing in the towel. The ratio of wheat, the bake time, the strength of the flame, the amount of water... They’d tried *everything*, but to no avail. At the end of a long and arduous sequence of trial and error, no decent bread was to be found. Slowly, disappointment turned into frustration, then resignation.

“It’s the texture. The damn texture... It just won’t get any better...” grumbled Musta through clenched teeth.

“Whatever. I say this is good enough,” huffed one of the cooks. “Especially considering there’s not enough regular wheat to go around right now. I mean, sure, it’s a substitute, but at least it’s *edible*. And when it’s keeping everyone from starving to death, isn’t it sort of entitled to complain about its taste?”

Musta made to dispute the sentiment, only to find that in his heart, he agreed. He could but shake his head in a stubborn attempt to avoid admitting his concession.

“No... Not yet... There must be some way...”

That was when he suddenly remembered the talk he’d had with Mia about setting up a faculty of food and how the academy had been collecting texts of culinary methods from around the world. Perhaps he could find a hint or two in those writings.

With that thought in mind, he immediately applied for a few days of leave and made his way toward Saint Mia Academy. Upon arriving there,

he found himself face to face with books. *Many* books. The Greenmoons, with their abundant connections abroad, had put their full efforts into the acquisition, and the result was truly jaw-dropping. There were texts from every corner of the continent. *And beyond*. A great many of the books were from overseas.

"This is..."

Despite feeling rather overwhelmed by what was frankly more of a library than a collection, he set his mind on combing through the contents. With every book he read, his eyes grew wider, and his wonder followed suit.

Musta was a diligent chef. Not content to rest on his laurels, he'd done a fair bit of culinary research on his own, skimming books, visiting restaurants, and filching ideas from fellow chefs.

But there was still so much *more*. So many techniques he'd never heard of. Even with his studiousness, he had no way of learning about the cuisine of distant nations across the continent, never mind on the other side of the sea.

And now, they were all here, readily accessible to anyone who could read. The significance of that fact was not lost on him.

"I see... So *this* is where schools shine..."

As this newfound appreciation sank in, he finally remembered to take a look at his surroundings. There were numerous figures, all buried in books as he'd been, but all much younger than him. Upon speaking with some of them, he learned that they'd all been drawn here by Mia's ideal of offering top-notch education to anyone who wished to learn, regardless of birth or upbringing. The academy was currently home to students of all sorts, from nobles to orphans.

"Her Highness's ideal academy..."

He remembered his reluctance when Mia had first proposed the idea to him, and he felt a deep shame. With it came a new resolve. As soon as he found a solution to this wheat problem, he'd go to her and formally promise his full cooperation.

"Um, excuse me."

Just then, he heard a voice. Turning toward it, he found a young boy.

"Might you be Mr. Musta Waggman, the head chef of the imperial court?" asked the boy curiously.

His manner of speech was refined, and there was a natural dignity to the way he carried himself. Furthermore, he knew Musta's name. Musta straightened, knowing he was undoubtedly in the presence of a young noble.

"Yes, I am indeed Musta Waggman. By His Imperial Majesty's grace, I enjoy the honor of working in the kitchen of the Whitemoon Palace," he replied. "May I know your name?"

"Oh. Of course. I'm sorry. I'm Cyril Rudolvon. Nice to meet you," said the boy with the composure of someone twice his age.

"Ah, Rudolvon... That would make you the son of the Outcount, yes?"

Musta was acquainted with Tiona Rudolvon through Mia, and he could definitely see traces of her in her brother.

"I was wondering what an imperial chef like yourself was doing here. Did you come with some instructions from Her Highness?"

"No. Actually..."

Figuring there was no need to hide anything, Musta briefly explained his situation. Cyril's expression visibly clouded as he listened.

"What's wrong?" asked Musta, puzzled by the boy's reaction.

Cyril lowered his head. "Please accept my sincerest apologies for your troubles. As a matter of fact, we were the ones who made that wheat."

"*You* made it?!"

His surprise elicited a grimace from Cyril.

"Mia No. 2 is a strain that Princess Arshia and I developed based on the wheat we discovered in the north, and we were also concerned about its taste..." said Cyril before looking up to meet Musta's gaze. "Again, I apologize for the inconvenience. But if you could give us some time... We just need a little more time, and I promise we'll develop a newer strain that's resistant to cold and tastes the same as the wheat we're used to from before. Until then, I ask that you bear with us."

"A newer strain... You plan to somehow improve that wheat strain?"

"I've been told that Perujin has the technology to do so. Our timeline is...a few years. Within a few years, we hope to have the new wheat on the market. That is our duty and mission."

Was it pride he saw on that young face? No. It was conviction. And confidence. The signs of someone who had been entrusted with a piece of the Great Sage's vision and had every intention of living up to it. How

could he not straighten before this boy? So it was that he did, with all the respect he'd afford the princess herself, as he watched the young boy go.

"It all makes sense now... This is why. It's for times like these that Her Highness wanted to have a faculty of food."

He was struck by an epiphany. If the wheat harvest failed, there had to be another way to feed the people. That was the mission that Mia had given Cyril. His solution was a new strain of wheat. If that new wheat tasted bad... That was *his* mission. The academy, the faculty of food, her request... It was all part of the mission that she'd given Musta Waggman, head chef of the imperial court.

His cook's comment echoed in his mind. *"When there's almost no food to eat, isn't it entitled to complain about its taste?"*

No.

Even if it tastes bad, it's still food. It keeps you from starving to death. So shut your trap, eat it, and be glad that you are.

That's not her. She wouldn't say that to her people.

He felt himself shedding something stifling, an invisible corset of sorts. The comment by his cook, the one he'd tried so hard to fight, simply fell away.

"That's right... She'd never cheapen food. She's someone who knows its true and proper value."

Food divorced from taste was admittedly still food. It would curb hunger. Sustain the body. But what of the mind and heart?

Memories of her birthday festival resurfaced. He recalled the miraculous nature of that joyous celebration and the bright smiles of people who'd eaten—in some cases, for the first time in months—a flavorful and filling meal.

Food feeds the body. Good food nourishes the soul. And a healthy body requires a healthy soul. By securing a substitute strain of wheat, Mia had protected the exterior health of her people. By applying the techniques of cuisine to that wheat, she clearly intended to strengthen their interior.

"That was why she'd come to me; she was trusting me with their souls."

He'd have to live up to it then. That was all there was to it. Day after day, she'd delighted him with liberal praise of his cooking. It was time for him to repay the favor. Determination burned hot in his chest. He returned to the books.

Finally, he found what he was looking for.

"What if I stopped baking it entirely? What if...I tried steaming it?"

It was a fundamental shift in thinking. He'd stepped all the way back and started again from square one.

Bread was an indispensable staple of Tearmoon cuisine, and wheat was indispensable for making bread. That logic had chained him to a line of thought from which he'd finally broken free.

"It's not just this continent. Cuisines exist everywhere in the world, and each has its own repertoire of techniques. Somewhere out there, there must be a technique that's perfect for this wheat."

With his newfound freedom of perspective, he retrieved from the stack of books the first one he'd read. He'd go through every single one again, but this time, without the rigid preconception of bread.

Musta's relentless trial-and-error, Cyril Rudolvon's endeavors, and the unsung efforts of Galv and his pupils both in and out of the academy... The fruit of this momentous undertaking was now known to all.

Each of them, bearing the trust of Princess Mia, had put forth their own resolve. Upon intersecting, they had formed the titular cross of the aptly christened Project X.

What *isn't* known to all, however, was the true origin of the project's name.

"Hmm... This new sweet the head chef thought up is pretty good. This, uh...glutinous texture is really interesting. I can't get enough of it. If he keeps experimenting with culinary techniques like this, one day... Oho ho. Infinity Cake, here I come."

And so, the quest for the Infinity Cake continued.

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Tearmoon Empire: Volume 8
by Nozomu Mochitsuki

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Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by TO Books
This English edition is published by arrangement with TO Books, Tokyo
English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: July 2022